

INTERSPIRITUALITY:
A GUIDE TO BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

By

JOSÉ M. ROMÁN

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Abstract

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Because of its relative youth, members of the interspiritual movement often lack primary resources (such as texts books) that explore interspiritual belief and practice. This demonstration project brought together a small community of interspiritual thought leaders and practitioners affiliated with One Spirit Interfaith Seminary, which trains interfaith/ interspiritual ministers, for the purpose of developing the first Guidebook to Interspiritual Belief and Practice. Through a process of primary research as well as surveys and interviews this demonstration project helped establish the major ideas and practices defining interspiritual life.

The Guidebook begins with an attempt to define interspirituality in a manner that is consistent with the works of its major proponents, Brother Wayne Teasdale and Kurt Johnson; it explores the Perennial Philosophy through the works of Houston Smith and Aldous Huxley; looks at mysticism at the center of interspiritual practitioners spirituality through the work of Houston Smith; the Constructivism (or anti-Perennialism) of Steven Katz; and finally the Guidebook explores Ken Wilber's work on Integral Theory and the development of human consciousness.

Further, we explore the relationship of interspiritual practitioners and sacred texts, as well as the ways interspiritual practitioners are living interspiritual lives by focusing on the seminal work of Rev. Matthew Wright on the phenomena of dual belonging. We

also look at the path breaking work of Adam Bucko on interspirituality's Modern Monastic Movement.

The Guidebook then looks at the various major spiritual practices of interspiritual practitioners. Using data acquired by One Spirit Interfaith Seminary of interspiritual/interfaith ministers, as well as responses to a survey administered by the writer of this Guidebook, we explore the many complex spiritual disciplines that interspiritual practitioners use in their lives. After an exhaustive journey through the world of interspirituality we explore the goal of interspiritual life which we define as a transformative union with ultimate reality such that consciousness realizes both the deepest connection and the most expansive freedom.

This work is dedicated to all interspiritual persons throughout the world, those who call themselves interspiritual, and those who do not. To all who believe that the Truth is infinite and capable of honoring a multitude of paths, may this Guidebook be of assistance to your life and to your work in this world.

Acknowledgments

This Demonstration Project's success is owed to the support and encouragement of a significant number of people. In some wisdom traditions it is a basic truism: no one stands alone; we are all the product of a multitude of people whose love and support sustain and guide us through our sacred lives.

I would like to thank all the interspiritual practitioners and thought leaders who joyfully took time from their very busy lives to participate in a complex, lengthy survey and/or interview. Their willingness to open their spiritual lives to scrutiny, and honestly and courageously share their faith and doubts, as well as their very personal spiritual journeys, ultimately made this demonstration project possible.

I also want to express my appreciation to all the members of my Site Team: Rev. Dr. Joyce Liechenstein, Rev. Dr. Ruqaiyah Nabe, Rev. Ingrid Scott, Rev. Sara Elizabeth Stoker, and Nomi Naeem. Their wisdom and guidance was invaluable. I especially want to thank Rev. Dr. Ruqaiyah Nabe, whose willingness to act as a mentor throughout this project was nothing less than a pure gift of spirit.

My deepest gratitude goes to my spiritual partner Rev. Ingrid Scott. When I needed guidance, wisdom, or a critical eye, and especially when I need to be cajoled into action, Ingrid was always there providing the necessary energy and spirit to help move me forward. I am so blessed to have Ingrid in my life as friend and partner in the journey to the deepest Truth.

I, and every other interspiritual practitioner, owe a significant debt to Dr. Kurt Johnson. Kurt is undoubtedly one of interspirituality's most gifted scholars and intellectuals. He is also a spiritual being of the highest order. He is a man of not only great intellect, but also character, heart, and soul. His guidance throughout the life of this work was irreplaceable; Kurt is one of a kind!

I must also express my abundant gratitude and profound love to the *One Spirit Interfaith Seminary*. Its students, teachers, deans, volunteers, staff, and Board, supported this project with their time, energy, and wisdom. The debt I owe that little institution is beyond anything I can put into words.

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PART I
INTERSPIRITUALITY: A GUIDE TO BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

INTRODUCTION

Unless our fundamental sacred connectedness with every being and thing is experienced deeply and enacted everywhere, religious, political, and other differences will go on creating intolerable conflict that can only increase the already dangerously high chances of our self-annihilation... —
—Andrew Harvey

Background

We live in a world of profound and significant change. A host of forces, including migration, urbanization, globalization, technology, and the emergence of cyber-communities, have caused major transformations in the way people live, create community, and define even their very sense of self. This rapid pace of change has even affected the realm of religion and spirituality.

Christians now practice Hindu yoga; Buddhists engage in Jewish prayer; Jews explore Hindu chat; Sufis practice Buddhist meditation; Catholic priests quote Sikh gurus and some even practice shamanic healing methods. There are also a growing number of people who claim to faithfully belong to two or more religious traditions at the same time. Finally, there are the “spiritual but not religious.”¹ And studies show that many of these people engage in a myriad of spiritual practices usually from a multiplicity of faith traditions.

The Pew Research Center, which performs a study of religion in America, recently found that nearly one in four Americans have been known to attend religious services, not including weddings and funerals, other than their own. The report, entitled

¹ See Robert C. Fuller, *Spiritual But not Religious: Understanding Unchurched America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

“Religion and Public Life: American Changing Religious Landscape,” also asserts, “Switching religion is a common occurrence in the United States.”²

Today the beliefs, rituals, sacred texts, teachers, and practitioners of various faith traditions are meeting, colliding, blending. In the same manner that race, color, gender, ethnicity, social and economic strata, nationality, sexual orientation and gender expression, have all become increasingly complex and fluid, religious and spiritual identities are also undergoing transformation. In this intimate personal realm, the realm of faith and belief, old boundaries are becoming porous. We now find people who claim to be:³

- Bi-ritual: This phenomenon is normally found in families with one or more faith traditions where a conscious decision has been made to celebrate/maintain the rituals of multiple faiths. (Like celebrating Passover and Christmas, or the Christian Eucharist and Hindu Satsang).
- Faithful But: These are people who maintain ties to the faith tradition of their birth, but strongly question or reject altogether aspects of that faith’s teachings. (Cafeteria Catholics is a deprecatory moniker used in the Roman Catholic Church for these people within that tradition.)
- Interfaith or Interreligious: These are people interested in dialogue between different faith traditions, often for the purpose of enhancing religious understanding and establishing common ground.
- Spiritual But Not Religious: These people (known as SBNRs) are usually not part of any organized religion but continue to express “spiritual” views; they often also

² Pew Research Center, “Religion and Public Life: American Changing Religious Landscape, May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>. It should be noted that neither Pew nor any other major statistical research center has performed an in-depth study that closely looks into the interspiritual or “mixed religion” phenomenon.

³ These definitions come from a verity of sources, and some of these are my own phrases.

engage in practices born within organized religious traditions (such as yoga, meditation, prayer, fasting, spiritual healing modalities, etc.). Some SBNRs also feel what has been described as an “allergic reaction” to organized religions due to their perceived patriarchy and misogyny, homophobia, racism, dogmatism, clericalism, abuse of power, and autocratic structures.

- **Spiritual Migrants:** These are people who have left a faith (usually one they were born into) and now practice another adopted tradition.
- **Practicing Multiple Religious Belonging:** These are people who claim to “belong” to two or more faith traditions at the same time.

In each of these phenomena one finds people transgressing traditional religious boundaries and creating new spiritual-identities.

Today’s generation has a sense that old identities, old boundaries, create a lack of personal wholeness or a loss of integrity. In short, this generation is experiencing a profound imperative – if you will, a call – to move into uncharted territory of spiritual consciousness.

In the realm of spirituality and religion this experience – the experience of moving beyond the bounded, clearly defined world of one’s own spiritual community and religion – has led to an evolving movement that hopes to birth wholeness out of confusion; a movement that turns social transgression and multiplicity of identity into sources of strength. This movement has a name: Interspirituality.

Interspirituality holds that the world’s enduring religious traditions all spring from mystical experiences or insights born of a shared reality. As a result, for the interspiritual person, the world’s enduring religious traditions and wisdom paths are all valuable and worthy of respect and study for they are products of an enduring Truth. For the interspiritual person there are no boundaries to spirituality, wisdom, or a compassionate

heart. Interspirituality inspires, indeed requires, openness to the other, to the unknown, to alien territory. At the core, interspirituality offers a fractured and confused modern humanity the hope that a new way of understating and defining one's self and connecting with the world can be created.

Do We Need a Guidebook?

Interspirituality is a relatively fledgling spiritual movement; as a result, few resources exist to help guide men, women, and young people interested in interspiritual practice. That is the purpose of this Guidebook. Developed with the help of a host of interspiritual thought leaders and practitioners, this Guidebook is designed to achieve four simple goals: (1) it helps to describe and define interspirituality; (2) it explores basic interspiritual beliefs; (3) it explores the various ways people practice interspirituality; (4) it also presents the common spiritual practices of interspiritual people.

How Did this Guidebook Come into Being?

In many ways the development of this Guidebook was a journey. The journey commenced in earnest in September of 2014 when I began to study for a Doctorate in Ministry at New York Theological Seminary. Almost from the start I was asked to consider the subject of my doctoral Demonstration Project. In other words, I was asked to consider what contribution I wanted to make to the community of spirit I served. After consulting with numerous friends, colleagues and spiritual teachers, I decided to develop a Guidebook of beliefs and practices that would aid interspiritual practitioners and seminarians.

To develop this Guidebook I knew I would have to assemble a small coterie of interspiritual practitioners and thought leaders who would help guide me through this journey; these were men and women who consented to being surveyed and in some cases

interviewed. These were people who would freely and courageously open their lives and share their own journey of belief, spiritual practice, and personal transformation.

An Outline of the Topics Covered In This Guidebook

The format of this Guidebook is simple; it is broken up into five sections:

- I. The first section begins with a preliminary question: What is Interspirituality? This seemingly simple question leads us to consider numerous perspectives found in this fairly young and vibrant community of spiritual seekers. It also lays the groundwork for all further discussions in this Guidebook.*

To answer this question we look to the works of Br. Wayne Teasdale, a Roman Catholic lay brother and modern mystic, who coined the term interspirituality. We also look for guidance in the works of Dr. Houston Smith, the famed religious scholar, and Dr. Kurt Johnson, a former monk, evolutionary biologist, and curator at the American Museum of Natural History, who wrote a recently published book on interspirituality. As you shall see in this Guidebook, we determined that interspirituality is defined in large part by a profound interest and deep commitment to experience the deepest core of the world's enduring religious and wisdom traditions. The core of the great religious and spiritual traditions, interspiritual practitioners believe, is a living reality that transforms consciousness and gives birth to a moral vision.

- II. The second section of this Guidebook moves into an exploration of the various beliefs found within the interspiritual community beginning with the Perennial Philosophy which forms one of the foundational principles of the interspiritual movement. The next major topic we explore is Mysticism and the role it plays in interspiritual belief and practice. This leads us to consider the importance that consciousness (and its transformation) plays in interspiritual philosophy. We also explore the place of Sacred Texts in interspiritual beliefs and practice.*

Having established a working definition of interspirituality in section one of this Guidebook, we begin in section two to explore the Perennial Philosophy, one of the central ideas of interspiritual practitioners. Perennialists, like proponents of interspirituality, believe that the mystical core of the world's great religions and spiritualities speak of one enduring reality or truth. To this end we look to the works of Houston Smith, one of the most ardent Perennialists of our time, and to a lesser extent Aldous Huxley whose 1946 book brought the subject its first publicity.

By this point in our journey we realized that any exploration of interspirituality would require an understanding of mysticism. Again turning to Houston Smith for guidance, we also explore the works of the Philosopher of Religion Steven Katz, a strong opponent of the perennialism exposed by Houston Smith and interspiritual thought leaders. Interspiritual practitioners place mysticism at the center of their spirituality; they believe that the core of religion and spirituality are formed out of mystical encounters or insights into a truth or reality that is the common ground of the human experience, and the common ground of all enduring spiritual and religious traditions. Interspiritual practitioners hold that mysticism is a path into the deepest truths of the world's wisdom traditions.

Through our journey we discover that interspiritual practitioners do not engage in mystical exploration of the world's wisdom traditions simply out of an intellectual interest, they do so with the goal of transforming human consciousness. As a result, this part of our journey then takes us to Integral Theory which for many interspiritual thought leaders forms the theoretical foundation describing the inner working of consciousness,

its evolution, and its transformation. And so we look to the works of Ken Wilber the primary exponent of integral studies in the United States.

Our journey then leads us to an exploration of the relationship of interspiritual practitioners to sacred texts. We explore how interspiritual persons use and interpret sacred scriptures; an especially vexing challenge given the fact that many of the texts come from different traditions, and espouse often competing and seemingly incompatible truths claims.

III. The third section provides us with an overview of the various ways men, women, and young people are living interspiritual lives. And this includes a consideration of the growing interspiritual Monastic Movement.

As our journey continued we looked into the numerous ways interspiritual people live their spirituality. How, we asked ourselves, can someone belong to two or more religious traditions at the same time? This leads us to the seminal work of Rev. Matthew Wright on the phenomena of *dual belonging*.

And then we move into the emerging Modern Monastic movement within interspiritual circles, which brought us to the works of Adam Bucko, an interspiritual practitioner, teacher, and youth advocate in New York City. Adam has lived a spiritually focused life nearly his entire life, and is now a leader in its burgeoning monastic movement.

IV. The fourth section provides a very quick overview of the various Spiritual Practices found among interspiritual practitioners.

The journey then moves into spiritual practice. Using data acquired by *One Spirit Interfaith Seminary* of interspiritual/ interfaith ministers, as well as responses to a survey

administered by the writer of this Guidebook, we explore the many complex spiritual disciplines that interspiritual practitioners make their own.

V. *Finally having gone through a comprehensive review of interspirituality, its beliefs and its practices, we ask ourselves the question: What is the goal of interspiritual life?*

After an exhaustive journey through the world of interspirituality, we explore the goal of interspiritual life which we define as a transformative union with ultimate reality such that consciousness realizes both the deepest connection and the most expansive freedom.

This Guidebook does not purport to answer all questions, nor does it assume to definitively establish all interspiritual norms either in belief or practices. The relative youth of this movement within spiritual and religious circles means that there are a host of questions that remain unanswered, issues that have yet to be faced, and challenges for which there are a host of possible approaches. In this Guidebook we have attempted to raise many of the major questions facing interspiritual practitioners and provide some guidance by exploring the various approaches interspiritual practitioners have taken in response to these challenges. If there is one guiding truth within interspiritual circles it is the belief that all people must walk their own path; every person must discover the truth as it manifests in his/her individual life. It is the sincere hope of all those who participated in the writing of this Guidebook that it prove helpful to its users as they walk their unique sacred paths.

How to use this Guidebook

It is our hope that this Guidebook will prove itself a simple, easy-to-read, resource and tool, to help the interspiritual practitioner, or those interested in interspiritual/interfaith dialogue. So how might this Guidebook help?

1. This Guidebook provides an understanding of what interspirituality is and what it is not.
2. It highlights many of the major ideas helping to shape this young spiritual movement.
3. It also focuses on some of the issues and challenges facing interspiritual practitioners.
4. It presents ways interspiritual practitioners respond to some of these issues and challenges. (For example, how to interpret sacred scriptures.)
5. Finally, this Guidebook can be used as the basis for further dialogue and study.

WHAT IS INTERSPIRITUALITY?

WHEN I WAS a teenager, I yearned to know the Unknowable and spent most of my energy trying to cultivate a connection to God. I memorized the Fatiha (the opening lines of the Qur'an), participated in zikr (Sufi chanting) and Dances of Universal Peace, read Rumi and Ibn 'Arabi, and studied Arabic calligraphy. I learned Hasidic chants and familiarized myself with the Kabbalistic Tree of Life, lit the candles of Shabbat and invoked the Shekhinah (the indwelling feminine Presence of God)... I attempted to keep the Jesus prayer going in a never-ending mental loop: "Lord Jesus Christ, have mercy on me." It wasn't that I feared Hell; I was wagering that if I could just keep his name on my mind, the Prince of Peace would enter my heart. Not only that: I practiced hatha yoga and engaged in such vigorous breathing exercises that my face went numb. I learned to play the harmonium and accompanied myself in hours of chanting Hindu divine Love; Kali and Durga, manifestations of the Divine Mother; and Hanuman, embodiment of devotion. I sat in silence on my black zafu practicing zazen, read the sutras of the Buddha and the aphorisms of Lao Tzu. I fingered the 108 sandalwood beads of my mala under my desk at school. I knelt at my bedroom altar, contemplating the statues of the deities and the framed faces of the gurus, and I called out to the Holy One with every fiber of my being . . . This terrifying confrontation with Unnamable Truth was quickly and mercifully followed by an insight: the same Supreme Reality that surpassed all understanding was accessible through every Sanskrit chant, Hebrew prayer and Christian hymn, through Buddhist meditation retreats and affirmations of the merciful and compassionate nature of Allah, through deep silence and unbridled song. By way of the many, I had encountered the One—over and over again—and I hadn't even noticed. It was subtle, and it required the engagement of subtle sensibilities.⁴

I yearned to know the unknowable... many of us can easily relate to Mirabai Starr's longing. As a young man I too explored a multitude of spiritual disciplines and religious traditions. I walked many different paths seeking to experience something of what, at times, I called God. I had dreams of burning bushes, of angelic visits, of transformative moments of enlightenment. Every spiritual practice I tried, every religious path I traveled, offered new experiences, new insights, and new gifts. The more I explored the more I learned, and the more powerful became the hunger for the

⁴ Mirabai Starr, *God of Love: A Guide to the Heart of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Rhinebeck, NY: Monkfish, 2012), Kindle Edition: Location 17-20.

unknowable. This insatiable, inexplicable hunger expressed itself in many forms; I was hungry for meaning, for purpose, for healing, for both transcendence and also for the deepest possible connection to life. I was seeking wisdom, joy, peace, yes, even love. In the here and now I wanted to feel one with eternity. I wanted to finally feel at home in and with life. In this search I am not alone.

Today the willingness to seek an experience of the ineffable by exploring the world's enduring religious and spiritual traditions has become a movement:

Interspirituality. The word Interspiritual was first coined by Brother Wayne Teasdale in his book, *The Mystic Heart* first published in 1999. In his book Br. Teasdale argued that all the world's great religious traditions are born out of experiences of the deepest reality or the transcendent. In other words, the world's great religions are born out of mystical experiences and insights. Interspirituality holds that these initial mystical experiences are then put into language, which eventually evolves into beliefs and teachings; these in turn give birth to texts, rituals, practices, and over time a history and finally a religious tradition with its own authority.

Nonetheless, at the core of every faith are the mystical experiences and insights of the faith's forebears:

- In the Jewish Scriptures, Moses experienced the presence of God in a burning bush, transforming an exile into an emancipator.
- In the Christian Gospels, Jesus discerned a God with whom he felt in complete union, and thus a carpenter became a Savior.
- In the Islamic faith Mohammed experienced the Divine while praying in a cave, and began a journey of transformation that turned a businessman into a Prophet.

- In the Buddhist faith Siddhartha Gautama sat below a Bodhi tree, realized the truth, achieved enlightenment, and began a journey that transformed Asian and world history.
- Within the Hindu faith there are God-Realized gurus whose very presence is said to transmit deep transformative truths.
- In Native American and African religions there are rituals that allow practitioners to enter complex states of consciousness that often leave them transfixed and over time transformed.

Nearly every great religious tradition has men and women who experienced the ineffable. And these experiences of the ineffable evolve into the core insights of every faith. Moreover, religious traditions continue to be renewed and invigorated by the work and inspiration of the faith's great mystics. In his book *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment (Hermeneutics: Studies in the History of Religions)*, Jess Hollenback writes:

From time to time in history, one encounters singularly gifted men and women called mystics, individuals who have often played pivotal roles as innovators, revitalizers, and reactionary conservators of their respective religious traditions. A quick glance at the more prominent names from among their ranks provides convincing proof of their historical and religious significance. Muhammad, Paul, Jesus of Nazareth, Gautama Buddha, Moses, Augustine of Hippo, Plotinus, the prophet Ezekiel, Ibn al-'Arabī, al-Ghazzālī, Black Elk, and Milarepa make up the list of famous mystics who have made their mark in the history of their respective religious traditions. What particular gift distinguishes mystics from ordinary men and women? The answer is their susceptibility to certain unusual states of consciousness by means of which they come into direct contact with a domain of experience that almost always remains inaccessible to the human mind in its ordinary waking state.⁵

⁵ Jess Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), Kindle Edition: Location 556-563.

Many interspiritual practitioners and thought leaders assert that this core of mystical insights produce the great convergence in moral vision and social commitments that one finds in the great religions of the world—a convergence explored by proponents of the Perennial Philosophy. Perennialists believe that all the world’s wisdom traditions share a common, universal truth.⁶ In his book *Rational Mysticism: Spirituality Meets Science in the Search for Enlightenment*, John Horgan writes, “The perennial philosophy holds that the world’s great spiritual traditions, in spite of their obvious differences, express the same fundamental truth about the nature of reality, a truth that can be directly apprehended during a mystical experience. Implicit in the perennial philosophy is the notion that mystical perceptions transcend time, place, culture, and individual identity.”⁷ (For a fuller analysis of this topic, see in this Guidebook the section entitled *The Perennial Philosophy*.)

Interspiritual practitioners believe that one small example of this moral convergence could be seen in a poster created by Paul McKenna of the Golden Rules of many of the world religions and presented to Mrs. Gillian Sorensen, Assistant Secretary General of the United Nations, on January 4, 2002:⁸

Aboriginal Spirituality - We are as much alive as we keep the Earth alive.
—Chief Dan George

⁶ While *perennialism* is largely ignored in modern academic circles, it is one of Interspirituality’s major organizing ideas. Perennialism first came into major discussion with the publication of Aldous Huxley’s *The Perennial Philosophy*. For a more modern exposition of the idea see Houston Smith, *Forgotten Truth, The Primordial Tradition*.

⁷ John Horgan, *Rational Mysticism: Spirituality Meets Science in the Search for Enlightenment* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2004), Kindle Edition: Location 323-326.

⁸ Brother Wayne Teasdale and Martha Howard, *Awakening the Spirit, Inspiring the Soul: 30 Stories of Interspiritual Discovery in the Community of Faiths* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights Publishing, 2012), Kindle Edition: Location 234-235.

Baha'i - Lay not on any soul a load that you would not wish to be laid upon you, and desire not for anyone the things you would not desire for yourself.
—Baha'u'llah, Gleanings

Buddhism - Treat not others in ways that you yourself would find hurtful.
—The Buddha, Udana-Varga 5.18

Christianity - In everything, do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.—Jesus, Matthew 7:12

Confucianism - One word which sums up the basis of all good conduct ... lovingkindness. Do not do to others what you do not want done to yourself.
—Confucius, Analects 15.23

Hinduism - This is the sum of duty: do not do to others what would cause pain if done to you. —Mahabharata 5:1517

Islam - Not one of you truly believes until you wish for others what you wish for yourself. —Fourth Hadith of an-Nawawi 13

Jainism - One should treat all creatures in the world as one would like to be treated. —Mahavira, Sutrakritanga

Judaism - What is hateful to you, do not do to your neighbor. This is the whole Torah; all the rest is commentary. —Hillel, Talmud, Shabbath 31a

Shinto - The heart of the person before you is a mirror. See there your own form.

Sikhism - I am a stranger to no one; and no one is a stranger to me. Indeed, I am a friend to all. —Guru Granth Sahib, p. 1299

Sufism - The basis of Sufism is consideration of the hearts and feelings of others. If you haven't the will to gladden someone's heart, then at least beware lest you hurt someone's heart for on our path, no sin exists but this.
—Dr. Javad Nurbakhsh, Master of the Nimatullahi Sufi Order

Taoism - Regard your neighbor's gain as your own gain and your neighbor's loss as your own loss. —T'ai Shang Kan Ying P'ien, 213–218

Unitarianism - We affirm and promote respect for the interdependent web of all existence, of which we are a part. —Unitarian principle

Wicca - An it harm no one, do what thou wilt (i.e., do what you wish, as long as it harms nobody, including yourself.) —The Wiccan Rede

Yoruba - One going to take a pointed stick to pinch a baby bird should first try it on himself to feel how it hurts.

Zoroastrianism - Do not do unto others whatever is injurious to yourself.
—Shayast-na-Shayast 13.29

Inspired by this understanding of religion, interspiritual persons are often willing, even committed, to exploring the world's faiths by experiencing the mystical core of these faiths. And by mystical core we speak of the fundamental expression of truth that comes out of connection to the ineffable which interspirituality claims for the world's enduring religious traditions. As Adam Bucko and Roy McEntee write in their new book, *New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living*:

Interspirituality plants us firmly outside of a fundamentalist adherence to our own particular religious tradition or spiritual path, demanding that we take seriously the revelations, realizations, and contemplative gifts of all authentic wisdom and religious traditions.⁹

Interspiritual practitioners enter into the mystical core of the various religious traditions through a variety of ways including study and by adopting practices associated with the world's religious paths. Brother Wayne Teasdale wrote in his last book, *A Monk in the World*, "Interspirituality is not a new form of spirituality, or an overarching synthesis of what exists, but a willingness and determination to taste the depth of mystical life in other traditions."¹⁰ By mystical life we are speaking of a life committed to transformation of consciousness through a realization (life transforming experience) of the deepest connection to reality or truth. Evelyn Underhill writes, "The mystic life, therefore, involves the emergence from deep levels of man's transcendental self; its capture of the field of consciousness; and the "conversion" or rearrangement of his feeling, thought, and will — his character — about this new centre of life."¹¹

⁹ Rory McEntee and Adam Bucko, *New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living* (New York: Orbis Books, 2015), Kindle Edition: Location 309-312.

¹⁰ Wayne Teasdale, *A Monk in the World* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2001), 63; McEntee and Bucko, Loc. 309-312.

¹¹ Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (n.p: Stellar Editions, 2014), Kindle Edition: Location 1360-1362.

As we shall see in this Guidebook, interspirituality is also not necessarily a new idea. It is an idea that has been within the spiritual and religious dialogue for some time. As Kurt Johnson and David Ord state in their seminal work, *The Coming Interspiritual Age*:

Brother Teasdale's naming of interspirituality was preceded by a host of earlier visionaries and leaders in all the world's religious and spiritual traditions. Interestingly, the names on this roster aren't the same as the names of the founders of the great religions, which all arose in what has become known as the Axial Age, the period from 800-200 BCE. The forerunners of interspirituality were visionaries who realized that a common experiential thread underpins all spiritual experience and is the harbinger of an eventual "great coming together."¹²

So among the core beliefs defining interspirituality is the idea that the world's great religions and wisdom traditions are connected by:

- Their common mystical core
- Their universal vision of human dignity and ethical teachings
- A commitment to justice

Nonetheless, interspirituality is more than a belief that all the world's religious traditions have value because they emanate from the same source; it is also a "practice." In other words, interspirituality is defined not only by what one believes but also by what one does. By this I mean it is a belief that affects behavior and life choices. Interspirituality affects the way one lives one's life.

The interspiritual person is not only willing but actively seeking to immerse him/herself in the mystical life of faith traditions with which he/she may not be familiar. In other words, the interspiritual person is actively trying to experience the interior of unfamiliar religious traditions. This is why throughout this Guidebook interspiritual persons are referred to as *practitioners*, in the sense that they have a practice.

¹² Kurt Johnson and David Ord, *The Coming Interspiritual Age* (Vancouver: Namaste Publishing, 2013), Kindle Edition: Location 849-850.

Interspiritual persons not only believe something but they do something... they actively seek to experience the mystical richness of the world's religious traditions. For the interspiritual person spiritual practices are a path to realize the core reality of religious experience...possibly even the core of reality itself! As we will discover within this Guidebook interspiritual persons engage in a host of practices designed to connect the practitioner with the core truths of the world's religions and wisdom traditions. With regards to these core truths, in an interview for a book on mysticism, the great scholar of religion Houston Smith says: "All religions agree on three fundamental tenets: First, reality is more unified than it appears. Second, reality is better than it ordinarily seems to us. Third, reality is more mysterious than it looks. These are the central insights of the perennial philosophy, which mystics know firsthand."¹³

Interspirituality has at times been disparaged as nothing more than an attitude towards life, an inclination towards acceptance of those who express spiritualities or practice a religion different from one's own. In essence interspirituality is often treated as a kind of religious multi-culturalism; a progressive attitude of *live-and-let-live* in religious affairs. As you shall see in this Guidebook to basic beliefs and practices, interspirituality is more than an attitude, it is potentially a developing spiritual philosophy and way of life.¹⁴ And by philosophy I mean that interspirituality may be developing:

1. A Metaphysical Perspective: Interspirituality makes assertions about what is true about reality.
2. An Epistemological Perspective: Interspirituality also has a developing sense of what can be known about reality.

¹³ Horgan, *Rational Mysticism*, Loc. 340-342.

¹⁴ Contrary to Wayne Teasdale's assertion, Interspirituality may be evolving into a new form of spirituality. A fact we will be exploring within this *Guidebook*.

3. An Ethics: Finally, given what is true about reality and what we can know about it, interspirituality makes claims about the way we ought to live our lives.

Nevertheless, interspirituality is evolving, growing, and as such, at times, it is ambiguous and even contradictory. Nevertheless, among thought leaders there does seem to be a growing consensus that interspirituality is a form of mystical theology and practice that asserts the value and dignity of all the world's religious and spiritual traditions.

Interspirituality holds that if you experience the mystical core common to all the faiths, the religious and spiritual traditions of the world open up in new ways, old boundaries dissolve, and new avenues for dialogue, respect, understanding and cooperation emerge. As a result, interspiritual practice allows for a courageous exploration and even mixing of religious language, sacred texts, theology, rituals, and practices...at times interspirituality even inspires a multiplicity of belonging as Christians practice Buddhist meditation, Jews become Islamic dervishes, and Hindus explore Daoism. Interspiritual practitioners hold that if all faiths come out of the same source, then regardless of their unique expressions (which are in and of themselves worthy of respect) they all lead back to the same Reality, a Reality that is the indescribable grounding of all existence.

It is in this sense that interspirituality seems to offer a fractured modern humanity a new vision of self and community. Modern life seems defined by a growing sense of confusion, anxiety, alienation, and even isolation. Interspirituality maintains that a new way of understating and defining one's self and connecting with the world can be created

in its place. Interspirituality holds that people can experience a reality that is diverse, changing, as well as interconnected, where the whole remains One.

Mysticism is at the heart of this movement. Br. Wayne Teasdale defined mysticism, in his book *The Mystic Heart* as “The desire for, awareness of, and insight into the ultimate reality, however this may be understood.”¹⁵ Most branches of mysticism hold that union with or absorption into “God,” “the absolute,” or the “realization” of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect, can be attained in this lifetime by the individual human person. The mystic is one who lives in communion with the absolute, or as a mystic would say, the truly Real. Br. Wayne Teasdale defined mysticism in his book, *The Mystic Heart*, as “direct, immediate experience of ultimate reality.”¹⁶

Interspiritual practitioners intuit that a direct, personal experience of the deepest Truth may hold a key to both understand and heal the world. As stated before, the world of many modern people is a world where old communal boundaries are broken and identities are in flux.¹⁷ The mystic – in other words, the interspiritual practitioner – is one seeking to move beyond the hold and seemingly fixed nature of identity, theology, and personal and communal categories. Teasdale says it best: “Mystical spirituality is practical, experiential, ineffable or non-conceptual, unitive or nondual, noetic, integrative, sapiential, giving certitude, and in possession of transcendent knowledge from direct experience.”¹⁸

¹⁵ Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 2010), 270.

¹⁶ Teasdale, *Mystic Heart*, 20.

¹⁷ In this writing we can find this material in the section entitled *The Background for this Demonstration Project*, in the official **Guidebook** it can be found in the *Introduction*

¹⁸ Teasdale, *Mystic Heart*, 22.

Interspiritual practitioners would say that while mysticism defines an experience, interspirituality defines a philosophy born of the experience. The Interspiritual person is attempting to go beyond the perennial philosophy which holds that all the world's great religions have a common or shared truth at their core. Interspiritual mysticism is not simply interested in the common philosophical bases of religion; it is interested in the common experiential bases of spirituality. To interspiritual practitioners the "experiential basis of spirituality" is the encounter between person and truth or reality that can take place mystically within religious or spiritual experience. And this encounter is transformative of consciousness.

In fact, interspiritual practitioners hold that the common core of values and moral perspectives spoken of by Perennialists, who hold that the world's enduring spiritual and religious traditions express the same fundamental truth about the nature of reality, is the result of this shared mystical experience. This is how the leadership of *One Spirit Interfaith Seminary*, which prepares men and women to serve as interfaith/ interspiritual ministers, expresses the mystical roots of interspirituality on their website:

Beneath the diversity of theological beliefs, rites, and observances lies a deeper unity of experience that is our shared spiritual heritage. Mystical spirituality is the origin of all the world religions, and every authentic spiritual path offers unique perspectives and rich insights into this deeper, direct experience of truth. In our time, the wisdom and depth of all paths are available to anyone who brings an open mind, generous spirit and heart to the search across traditions.¹⁹

Interspiritual thought leaders also go further. Many believe that by experiencing the core mystical truths of the world's great religions and wisdom paths a person can be

¹⁹ One Spirit Learning Alliance, "What is Spirituality?" <http://onespiritinterfaith.org/about-us/what-is-interspirituality> (accessed December 18, 2014).

transformed.²⁰ Interspiritual practitioners believe that the ultimate aim of spirituality (and religion proper) is the transformation of consciousness such that the individual achieves the highest level of human maturity. And by “maturity” is meant achieving the complete and whole development of the human person. Johnson and Ord write in *The Coming Interspiritual Age*, “the true interspiritual experience is itself synonymous with the nature of true spiritual, moral, and ethical maturity in the context of any of the world’s spiritual traditions. Interspirituality is actually spiritual maturity and thus quite in tune with all the world’s existing traditions.”²¹

As will be explored further in this Guidebook, interspiritual practitioners believe that this transformation, which occurs at the level of individual consciousness, ultimately has profound social consequences. The spiritually mature person, interspirituality holds, moves out into the world, unhindered by old boundaries (be they religious or otherwise) and free of inflexible identities, prepared for a life of *selfless sacred service*. It is *selfless* because it is focused on the other, without reference to personal need or gain. It is *service* because it is a giving of one’s own presence to another, for another’s wellbeing. And it is *sacred* because it is an expression of the deepest reality, the reality of connection, whose finest expression is love.

Therefore a definition of interspirituality will refer to the following:

- The belief that all the enduring religions of the world are the product of mystical encounters with the deepest reality of being;

²⁰ This is explored much more fully in the chapter in the *Guidebook* entitled “The Goal of Interspiritual Life.”

²¹ Johnson and Ord, *Coming Interspiritual Age*, Loc. 6837-6840.

- The willingness (and often, deep commitment) to experientially connect with the world's religious traditions through their core mystical insights and practices;
- The conviction that spirituality, as expressed and nurtured by the core insights of the world's great wisdom traditions, can and should lead to a transformation of human consciousness;
- The confidence that spiritual practice, nurtured by the deepest truths of the world's faith traditions and wisdom paths, can lead to the highest level of human maturity which reconnects the individual to creation from a position of boundless compassion, innate wisdom, and self-less service.

INTERSPIRITUAL BELIEFS

The Perennial Philosophy

The central idea of the perennial philosophy is that Divine Truth is one, timeless, and universal, and that the different religions are but different languages expressing that one Truth. The symbol most often used to convey this idea is that of the uncolored light and the many colors of the spectrum which are made visible only when the uncolored light is refracted. In the Renaissance, the term betokened the recognition of the fact that the philosophies of Pythagoras, Plato, Aristotle, and Plotinus incontrovertibly expounded the same truth as lay at the heart of Christianity. Subsequently the meaning of the term was enlarged to cover the metaphysics and mysticisms of all of the great world religions, notably, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Islam.²²

One of the major ideas forming the foundation of interspiritual thought is the Perennial Philosophy (*philosophia perennis*). Perennialism, as it is often referred to, was said to have been initially championed by German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz who taught that all the world's wisdom traditions were expressions of a common truth.²³ In modern times the term re-entered western intellectual life with the publication of Aldous Huxley's 1945 book, *The Perennial Philosophy*. In his book Huxley argued that at the core of all the world's great and enduring religions and wisdom traditions is an expression of ultimate reality born of a common mystical experience or insight. Huxley writes in his book:

PHILOSOPHIA PERENNIS— the phrase was coined by Leibniz; but the thing— the metaphysic that recognizes a divine Reality substantial to the world of things and lives and minds; the psychology that finds in the soul

²² William Stoddart, "Forward," *Ye Shall Know the Truth: Christianity and the Perennial Philosophy*, Mateus Soares de Azevedo, ed., ix-xii (Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2005), ix.

²³ See the excellent article by Charles B. Schmitt, "Perennial Philosophy: From Agostino Steuco to Leibniz," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 27 (1966), 505-532.

something similar to, or even identical with, divine Reality; the ethic that places man's final end in the knowledge of the immanent and transcendent Ground of all being—the thing is immemorial and universal. Rudiments of the Perennial Philosophy may be found among the traditionary lore of primitive peoples in every region of the world, and in its fully developed forms it has a place in every one of the higher religions.²⁴

In his book Huxley then proceeded to explore commonalities in subject, theme, perspective, and values found in the sacred texts of many of the world's great religious traditions. Like interspiritual practitioners and thought leaders of today, Huxley believed that the perennial truth (the core truth) of all the world's wisdom traditions became known through unique individuals gifted with mystical insights. He writes:

The Perennial Philosophy is primarily concerned with the one, divine Reality substantial to the manifold world of things and lives and minds. But the nature of this one Reality is such that it cannot be directly and immediately apprehended except by those who have chosen to fulfil certain conditions, making themselves loving, pure in heart, and poor in spirit.²⁵

It should be noted, advocates of the Perennial Philosophy are not blind to the profound and complex differences found in the major religions of the world; they simply assert that these differences, valuable and important as they may be, mask an underlying, unitive truth. The religious scholar Houston Smith, one of perennialism's great modern proponents, writes:

Is it immaterial that Hinduism and Buddhism teach reincarnation whereas Christianity rejected it; that Christianity and Islam affirm the soul whereas Buddhism negates it; that Christianity exalts the Trinity while Judaism and Islam repudiate it; that Judaism, Christianity, and Islam propound creation whereas Taoism and Neoplatonism prefer emanation? It's not immaterial at all, the perennialist replies; on the contrary, it is providential. Here, though, the relevant point is that, important as these differences are in respects that are about to be indicated, they are not ultimate. Red is not green, but the difference pales before the fact that both are light. No two

²⁴ Aldous Huxley, *The Perennial Philosophy* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), vii.

²⁵ Ibid.

waves are identical, but their differences are inconsequential when measured against the water that informs them all.²⁶

In his earliest work on the Perennial Philosophy, Smith argues that the perennial truth to which this philosophy refers is of such quality as to make it nearly impossible to describe using normal human language or mathematics.²⁷ Moreover, it is a truth that is “revealed” or “realized” only to a selected few, namely the mystics. He proceeds to describe the ways this truth manifests to the mystics. He writes, “there came to each that news of another world which it always religion’s business to convey.”²⁸ In other words, the mystics realize that there is more to the world than is commonly understood. Simply put, creation, reality, being, is richer, deeper, and filled with more meaning. He goes on to write that the “message” of this primordial (or perennial) truth is “always the same”:

- The first we have just been noting: the inside is ineffable. Emphatically it knows, but like higher mathematics, what it knows is so little contagious with ordinary knowing that scarcely a hint of it can be conveyed to the uninitiated. On balance, therefore, we must say that it is incommunicable.
- The vision shows existence to be characterized by an entirely unexpected unity.
- The discovery naturally awakens joy. But it must be immediately added that the joy is not fortuitous. It is the logical consequence of the cause that preceded it: the discovery of being’s unity.²⁹

Houston Smith is arguing that these propositions constitute the central message of all the world’s enduring faith traditions. They are windows into ultimate reality. Let us explore Houston Smith’s propositions.

²⁶ Houston Smith, “Is There a Perennial Philosophy?” *The Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55 (1987): 553-66.

²⁷ One of Houston Smith’s earliest works defending the Perennial Philosophy is his book *Forgotten Truth, The Primordial Tradition* (New York: Harper Colophon, 1977).

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 110-111.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

The Paradox of Unintelligibility: Smith argues that the first mystical insight is what I call the paradox of unintelligibility. Ultimate reality, Smith believes, is ineffable. In other words, it is unknowable in the normal manner that we know. It cannot be described or explained in the manner we normally describe or explain reality; in other words, ultimate reality cannot be described using human language; it cannot be modeled using the tool of mathematics. Ultimate reality does not reveal itself to us in the manner that normal experience or phenomena reveals itself; it is neither subjective nor objective truth. In this sense it is inexplicable. Therefore, Smith says of ultimate reality that it is ineffable and incommunicable. And here lies the paradox because he also argues that to the “initiated” (in other words, to the mystic) there is in essence a revelation, a revealing. Smith argues that the initiated (mystics) experience a form of communication...or shall we say a form of communion.

Why use the word communion? Communion comes from the Latin *commūniō* designating a general participation, or *commūnis* meaning some form of commonality. In other words, by communion we are describing a form of sharing in, a form of bonding, that occurs in this experience. Hence the value of thinking of this experience as a form of communion, because communion is not simply about what we understand, it is about what we experience; it is about relationship. Moreover, this experience, this communion, has a noetic quality to it; there is a knowing.

Yet this mystical knowing challenges our usual way of understanding things. In other words, the mystical experience is a living Buddhist koan. Within this experience a person and ultimate reality have an encounter that allows for a form of discernment where there is a knowing of the unknowable, while the unknowable remains unknown.

Such an experience, Smith believes, can only be expressed, but never truly described, in the mythopoetic (in other words, symbolic) language of spirituality and religion.

“Symbolism,” Smith says, “is the science of the multiple levels of reality. It is the science of seeing how something on one level, here in the material, sensible plane, actually transports our minds to a reality which is on a higher level Equally one could say that it is an opening on the sensible plane for the supersensible to enter into and infuse it To say that this mode of seeing is important is an understatement. It’s the lifeline.”³⁰

Conceptually only symbols can point us to the core of the mystical experience where the finite communes with infinity. The power of the symbolic to communicate mystic insights is an idea shared by many other scholars of mysticism. Evelyn Underhill writes in her book *Mysticism*:

The mystic, as a rule, cannot wholly do without symbol and image, inadequate to his vision though they must always be: for his experience must be expressed if it is to be communicated, and its actuality is inexpressible except in some side-long way, some hint or parallel which will stimulate the dormant intuition of the reader, and convey, as all poetic language does, something beyond its surface sense.³¹

Unity: Smith then argues that the second message is the reality of the unity of all creation, the oneness of all phenomena. In other words, the paradoxical knowing of the unknown leads us to two conclusions: (1) it is a reality, and (2) beyond the plurality and diversity of everyday life there is a unity to ultimate reality. Smith is arguing that these two insights are among the deepest truths of existence. The great interspiritual mystic and practitioner Bede Griffiths explains it this way:

³⁰ Houston Smith, *The Way Things Are: Conversations with Houston Smith on the Spiritual Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press), Kindle Edition: Location 2114-2119.

³¹ Underhill, *Mysticism*, Loc. 1558-1560.

Some people imagine that when one is meditating, one is getting more and more isolated and separated from the world, and that in a sense is true. There is separation on the level of sense and even on a psychological level. But if one reaches the depth of reality then one rediscovers the whole creation in its depth, in its center, in its unity.³²

Smith is arguing that despite all the diversity we experience in creation there is a foundational and transcendent unity. Wayne Teasdale puts it this way, “Awakening, the bursts of illumination, of intense clarity of insight into the nature of reality, always involves this condition of unity.”³³ After studying the mystics of a host of spiritual traditions (Hindu, Buddhist, Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Native American, Aboriginal, and African) Denise Lardner Carmody and John Tully Carmody write: “Although mystics may say many things about what happens to them, they confess regularly that what they can say falls far short of what happens. The happening, the oneness or being they experience, is far more real and far richer than any words they can summon to represent it.”³⁴

In Advaita Vedanta, a philosophical school within Hinduism, this unity is expressed in phrases such as All is God, non-dual reality, and Oneness. For example, if indeed everything is God – God is both the source of creation and its substance — then particularity is an illusion and the truly real is the oneness of existence. Matthew Taft writes, “If the whole universe and everything in it is none other than God, then that is a nondual universe.”³⁵ In religion this is an expression of monism the belief that all things

³² Bede Griffiths, *River of Compassion: A Christian Reading of the Bhagavad Gita* (Warwick, NY: Amity House, 1987), 124.

³³ Teasdale, *Mystic Heart*, 219.

³⁴ Denise Lardner Carmody and John Tully Carmody, *Mysticism: Holiness East and West* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), Kindle Edition: Location 179-180.

³⁵ Michael W. Taft, *Nondualism: A Brief History of a Timeless Concept* (n.p.: Amazon Digital Services, 2014), Kindle Edition: Location 14.

come from the same source and/or are made of the same substance. Houston Smith argues that mystics experience this realization of unity. And that this unity is expressed in one way or another in all the enduring religious traditions of the world. This unity, this oneness, has been symbolized and expressed in many ways by various faith traditions. We hear phrases such as: there is only God; co-dependent arising; non-duality; interdependence; monism; emptiness; nothingness; all is consciousness; all is One. In the Christian tradition, which has historically been opposed to monism, the philosopher Paul Tillich supported his view that all is one with a verse found in Christian scriptures, the Book of Acts, (chapter 17, verse 28) which states: *For in him we live and move and have our being.*

Joy: Finally Houston Smith says, that the realization that ultimate reality is real and expresses an unexpected unity, engenders a profound joy. The writer, mystic, and interspiritual practitioner Raimon Panikkar puts it this way, “The contemplative has the spontaneous power to transform a situation by the sheer joy of having discerned the bright spot in the otherwise dark canvas of human transactions.”³⁶

What is this dark canvas that Raimon Panikkar speaks of? The human experience is often defined by a profound sense of separation and aloneness in the world, and often also a sense of meaninglessness. The mystic, on the other hand, discovers that at the core of creation there is what Smith refers to as an ineffable and uncommunicable reality, but a reality nevertheless. In other words, the perennial insight of the world’s great religious paths is that there is a meaningful depth to reality. And this depth expresses a unity, a oneness, that is the true face of existence. Therefore, the mystic experiences that he/she is

³⁶ Raimon Panikkar, *Mysticism, Fullness of Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2014), Kindle Edition: Location 1285-1286.

not separate from the universe but one with it. I am not a stranger in this universe, says the mystic, but an intimate expression of it. All creation is grounded in and an expression of unity . . . and the mystic realizes this unity. In other words, the mystic doesn't simply know this unity; he/she experiences this unity. The mystic experiences reality anew. The mystic communions intimately with this reality in a way that is transformative of consciousness. Where once there was separation there is now connection; where there were pieces there is a sense of the whole. There is a nearly incommunicable meaning in this experience of ultimate reality. This connection, this unity, this meaning, lifts the mystic beyond the "dark canvas of human transactions" into an expression of joy.

Over time many have concluded that what Houston Smith described in this early work was the initial experience, but not necessarily the message. In his book *Grit and Grace*, in a chapter entitled "A Universe Within," Ken Wilber, another major proponent of perennialism, describes the message at the core of the experience; he describes what he believes are the fundamental perennial truths (these are the truths that in one way or another appear in all the great religious and spiritual traditions):

- Reality has an ultimate nature. As Wilber describes it: "Spirit exists, God exists, a Supreme Reality exists. Brahman, Dharmakaya, Kether, Tao, Allah, Shiva, Yahweh," They call that which is experienced, "many who is really One."³⁷
- The human person can find this Reality or Spirit within. Most of us don't realize this Reality-Spirit within, however, because we most often operate from an illusory state or world defined by separation and duality.
- There is a way out of this fallen state; in other words, there is a Path to liberation.

³⁷ Ken Wilbur, *Grace and Grit: Spirituality and Healing in the Life and Death of Treya Killam Wilber* (Boston: Shambhala, 2000), 81.

- If we follow this path to its end, the result is a Rebirth or Enlightenment, a direct experience of Spirit within, a Supreme Liberation.
- This then marks the end of suffering.
- Once freed the individual person moves naturally to a life of selfless service on behalf of all creation.

Mysticism and Interspirituality

What do interspiritual practitioners mean by mysticism?

As stated earlier, interspirituality originates from the idea that all the world's enduring religious traditions are born of mystical experiences and insights. These mystical experience, they believe, connect the individual to a ground of being common to all humanity and creation. In other words, Interspiritual thought leaders hold that the forebears of the enduring religious traditions (people like Moses, the Jewish Prophets, Jesus Christ, Saint Paul, Mohammed, Buddha, and Lao Tzu) had such mystical encounters or experiences inspiring transformative insights. And these, in turn, spurred transformative spiritual and religious movements. So mysticism plays an essential role in interspiritual thinking and practice. Within interspiritual circles mysticism forms the connecting tissue linking the world's abundant and divergent spiritual and religious traditions.

The term mysticism is itself derived from a Greek word meaning "to conceal."³⁸ In his book *Mysticism in the World Religions*, Edward G. Parminder writes, "The origins of the word mysticism were in the Mysteries of ancient Greece. This name was perhaps derived from *muein* [μύειν]...with the probable primary said of 'one initiated into the

³⁸ *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2014, s.v. "mysticism," <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2014/entries/consciousness/>.

Mysteries.’”³⁹ In other words, at the heart of the word mysticism is the idea of mystery or the unknown.

In early Christianity mysticism came to refer to hidden or mysterious truths found in sacred scripture. As the term developed within Christianity mysticism came to mean direct experience of God (what came to be known in some Christian traditions as “mystical union”). Moreover, in the hands of religious practitioners in both the West and the East, this direct experience (this mystical union) came to be thought of as a vehicle for personal transformation. Which brings us to modern times; today the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* defines mysticism “as a constellation of distinctive practices, discourses, texts, institutions, traditions, and experiences aimed at human transformation, variously defined in different traditions.”⁴⁰

Today within the interspiritual community there is widely accepted definition of mysticism beautifully and very simply articulated by Evelyn Underhill in her book *Practical Mysticism* (1915). According to her, “Mysticism is the art of union with Reality.”⁴¹ With this seemingly simple definition of mysticism as backdrop, who then is a mystic? Drawing from her once more, “The mystic is a person who has attained that union in greater or less degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment.”⁴²

Hence within the interspiritual community mysticism is about experience that is unitive. By unitive we mean experiences where there is a “blurring or eradication of

³⁹ Edward Geoffrey Parminster, *Mysticism in the World's Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1976), 8.

⁴⁰ *Stanford Encyclopedia*, s.v. “mysticism.”

⁴¹ Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism* (n.p.: Start Publishing, 2013), Kindle edition, 2.

⁴² *Ibid.*

multiplicity” and a sense of oneness or absorption into a whole.⁴³ In such an experience the sense of individual existence is subsumed into a greater reality. Examples of these unitive experiences include:

- Mystical union with the Divine, as in certain forms of Christian and Sufi mysticism;
- The Hindu experience where Atman (the deepest Self) is experienced as Brahman (Divinity);
- Meditative experiences within some Buddhist communities of unqualified, pure, realizations of being or consciousness can also fall into this unitive category.⁴⁴

So within interspirituality mysticism is focused on experiences — and the spiritual practices that help foster experiences — that bring people to a unitive experience of ultimate reality. It should be noted that there are other ways to define mysticism such that:

- The focus is not on experience but on “practices, discourses, texts, institutions, and traditions that foster human transformation.” Within such definitions the focus is on a kind of mystical orientation to life such that life is experienced as filled with depth, purpose, and meaning.
- It is inclusive of non-unitive experiences.⁴⁵ Some practitioners of African Religions, for example, experience mystical encounters with a variety of distinct deities.

⁴³ s.v. “mysticism.”

⁴⁴ It should be noted, there are also experiences defined as mystical that do not fall within the unitive category. An example of that are shamanic experiences (as can be found within Santeria and Candomble, both syncretic religions practiced primarily in the Caribbean and Latin America) where the individual is said to have encounters with a host of deities and spirits, and there is no discernable merging of self within a greater unitive whole.

⁴⁵ s.v. “mysticism.”

The Purpose of Mystical Experience within Interspirituality

As stated earlier within interspiritual circles the fundamental purpose of the mystical experience has been defined as union with the ultimate reality. Which leaves us with the question, for interspiritual practitioners what is the purpose of such union?

According to interspiritual thought leaders (such as Wayne Teasdale, Houston Smith, and Kurt Johnson), union with ultimate reality is a transformative experience. As one community of scholars put it, “Mystics want to meet, deal with, praise, and be transformed by the best, the brightest, the most ultimate (necessary, independent, non-contingent) reality there is.”⁴⁶

Mysticism, therefore, is an experience or set of experiences that transform individual consciousness. In her book, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, Evelyn Underhill says of mysticism, “The business and method of Mysticism is Love.”⁴⁷ She goes on to write:

Mysticism...is non-individualistic. It implies, indeed, the abolition of individuality; of that hard separateness, that “I, Me, Mine” which makes of man a finite isolated thing. It is essentially a movement of the heart, seeking to transcend the limitations of the individual standpoint and to surrender itself to ultimate Reality; for no personal gain, to satisfy no transcendental curiosity, to obtain no other-worldly joys, but purely from an instinct of love. By the word heart, of course we here mean not merely “the seat of the affections,” “the organ of tender emotion,” and the like: but rather the inmost sanctuary of personal being, the deep root of its love and will, the very source of its energy and life. The mystic is “in love with the Absolute” not in any idle or sentimental manner, but in that vital sense

⁴⁶ Carmody, *Mysticism*, Loc. 4640-4641. One should note that this quote does not capture the truth of some forms of Buddhist meditation which are purposeless in nature. While there are benefits, the point of meditating, some Buddhist schools of thought will tell us, is simply to be, as in not-being a self, hence the lack of goals.

⁴⁷ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 85.

which presses at all costs and through all dangers towards union with the object beloved.⁴⁸

In this chapter on *Mysticism and Interspirituality* I have focused our exploration of mysticism on mystical experiences; however, as Evelyn Underhill writes, “mysticism is no isolated vision, no fugitive glimpse of reality, but a complete system of life carrying its own guarantees and obligations.”⁴⁹ In other words, mysticism she believes is transformative; it leaves the person changed at the level of consciousness, behavior and being. Mysticism to her is an expression and experience of love...one could even say it is a relationship with love at its deepest level.

In his book, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, Fr. Thomas Merton, the Roman Catholic Cistercian monk writes:

The real purpose of meditation . . . is the exploration and discovery of new dimensions of freedom, illumination and love...What is the relation of this to action? Simply this. He who attempts to act and do things for others or for the world without deepening his own self-understanding, freedom and integrity and capacity to love, will not have anything to give others. He will communicate to them nothing but the contagion of his own obsessions, his aggressiveness, his ego-centeredness, his delusions about ends and means, his doctrinaire prejudices and ideas.⁵⁰

Mysticism and mystical practice can result in the transformation of consciousness such that the individual paradoxically experiences both a new freedom and a new sense of connection to the world. By leaving behind the ordinary and encountering something they experience as the ultimate reality, the mystic sees the fragility and contingency of everything personal and social. This leaves him/her with a new freedom as old

⁴⁸ Underhill, *Mysticism*, 71.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Thomas Merton, *Contemplation in a World of Action*, reprint (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998), 160.

boundaries of belief, culture, and identity lose some of their meaning and their power. But for many the experience does not end there. Mystics also sense a deeper truth to reality, which leaves them with a sense of deeper connection to creation. The mystic attains a sense that there is indeed a deeper reality and meaning to existence, beyond the one defined by personal, cultural, and social norms. As Ken Wilber writes:

The essence of mysticism is that in the deepest part of your own being, in the very center of your own pure awareness, you are fundamentally one with Spirit, one with Godhead, one with the All, in a timeless and eternal and unchanging fashion.⁵¹

He goes on to write:

Indeed, the whole point of meditation or contemplation—whether it appears in the East or in the West, whether Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu—is to free ourselves from the “optical delusion” that we are merely separate egos set apart from each other and from eternal Spirit, and to discover instead that, once released from the prison of individuality, we are one with Godhead and thus one with all manifestation, in a perfectly timeless and eternal fashion.⁵²

But one cannot end this discussion without acknowledging the profound challenge one is left with in trying to communicate this deeper reality. In short, this is a knowing beyond sensations, images, and concepts; it transforms and it teaches but never truly reveals itself. Br. Wayne Teasdale writes:

My inner life has been the drama of the divine mystery communicating its presence and love to me, and saturating my being. But it has been an essentially apophatic experience — one that cannot be grasped or described. The mystical life defies our categories of systemization. Its vividity, clarity, intensity, and transcendental nature overflow our finite categories. Bede Griffiths once said to me that ultimate realization is similar to sitting in a completely dark room. You seem to be alone, but then all of a sudden someone comes up and wraps his or her arms around you. You know someone is there, but you can't see a face. You know the

⁵¹ Wilber, *Grace and Grit*, 19.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 20.

divine is there because it loves you, holds on to you, elevates you to greater capacity; but it rarely removes its veil.⁵³

As a result of this *veil* there continues to be dialogue within interspiritual circles about the message found in mystical unitive experiences; however, informed by mystical theology, and Eastern philosophy, interspiritual thought leaders and practitioners seem to be arriving at consensus on some aspects of ultimate reality. Many interspiritual practitioners hold that:

- The deepest aspects of reality are ineffable and hence beyond the capacity of written and spoken language to adequately describe or mathematical language to effectively model.
- Although the ultimate nature of reality is unknowable, there are aspects of consciousness that can “realize” or “experience” this ultimate nature.
- Once experienced we find that:
 - a. The ultimate nature of reality is the true nature of all there is and is not.
 - b. That reality is much more mysterious than we may normally believe.
 - c. In spite of this mystery one is left with a sense of unity undergirding reality.
 - d. This reality, which is to say creation and human life, has an ineffable dignity... some would say sacredness.
- Given the dignity of creation the human person is called to a moral life.

Achieving mystical experiences

While there are numerous ways that people have achieved mystical unitive experiences, it must be noted that there is no clear and definite way to enter into mystical states of consciousness. In fact, many interspiritual practitioners claim no specific “experience” but instead assert a kind of mystical orientation to life. Br. Wayne Teasdale

⁵³ Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart*, 211-212.

writes, “We can also distinguish between mysticism as an experience and mysticism as a process [*one can think of it as a path*] of spiritual life. The former is very common, while the latter requires an ongoing commitment, regardless of the tradition.”⁵⁴

People who “commit” to this mystical orientation to life sense that life is more than the sum total of sensory experience or conceptual thought. They hold to the belief that the truths claimed by the world’s great religious and spiritual mystics are real. They believe that there is indeed something powerful and potentially transformative that spiritual paths can lead you to. To these people mysticism is not so much an experience but a way of life. Writing of this type of mystical orientation to life, Wayne Teasdale states in his book, *The Mystic Heart*:

Everything is an avenue leading to the experience of Ultimate Reality. The divine communicates itself in all things. There are infinite ways to encounter the source...Ultimate Reality may be experienced in virtually anything. There is no place, no activity that restricts the divine. It is everywhere. ⁵⁵

Nevertheless, there are numerous paths that men and women have traversed to achieve mystical experiences:

SPIRITUAL PRACTICE: Many people have had mystical experiences during or after engaging in spiritual practices such as prayer, meditation, sweat lodges, and yoga, while others have had these experiences as part of a religious ritual. In his seminal book, *The Variety of Religious Experience*, William James goes through numerous case studies of people whose spiritual practice lead to mystical experience. Spiritual practice, of course achieves a variety of goals, but for purposes of achieving mystical experience, many of

⁵⁴ Ibid., 22.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

these practices help to make the mind a more receptive tool. Eugene G. D'Aquili, a research psychiatrist and his colleagues explored the science behind mystical experience in their book, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief*, writes, "The first step in attaining mystical union is to quiet the conscious mind and free the spirit from the limiting passions and delusions of the ego."⁵⁶

(It should be noted: For many interspiritual practitioners, spiritual practice has as its ultimate goal the transformation of consciousness such that it manifests both a wisdom and compassion that seem to be in alignment with the deepest truth of being. In other words, as we will explore in this Guidebook, some interspiritual practitioners seem to be asserting that the ultimate nature of reality expresses itself in a human person as both a deep knowing and an expansive unconditional love.)

NATURAL: Mystical experiences have also been reported by people who experience them spontaneously, without any effort, and without any apparent cause. This has been referred to as *spontaneous realization*. Numerous interspiritual practitioners surveyed and interviewed for this Guidebook had these types of saponaceous mystical experiences in their lives. The great Indian guru Bhagavan Sri Ramana Maharshi is said to have experienced such a natural mystical moment in his life; it is said that the experience left him transformed.

TRAUMA: Some people have had mystical experiences in the midst of personal challenges such as death of a loved one or while confronting a life-threatening condition. Again, various interspiritual practitioners surveyed and interviewed for this Guidebook had these types of experiences.

⁵⁶ Andrew Newberg, Eugene G. D'Aquili and Vince Rause, *Why God Won't Go Away: Brain Science and the Biology of Belief* (New York: Random House, 2008), Kindle Edition: Location 1544-1545.

DRUGS: Some people have induced what they have defined as mystical experiences using drugs such as LSD, eating psychotropic mushrooms, or using peyote. The religious scholar Houston Smith reported a profound mystical experience while experimenting with psychotropic drugs. He refers to these drugs as entheogens, which suggest that they are God inducing substances. Smith discusses entheogens in the book *Rational Mysticism: Spirituality Meets Science in the Search for Enlightenment*.⁵⁷

NEUROPHYSIOLOGICAL: Finally, some neuropsychological conditions have induced mystical-like experiences in some people. Recently the neurologist Dr. Eben Alexander wrote a bestselling book, *Proof of Heaven. A Scientist's Case for the Afterlife*, describing his personal mystical experience while suffering a coma. In the final phase of his experience Dr. Alexander seems to achieve a unitive state of being.

It must be noted, there has been speculation that mystical states are simply forms of psychotic episodes. The research psychiatrist Dr. Eugene d'Aquili has come to the conclusion that these are two very different mental states. He writes:

Mystics and psychotics tend to have very different interpretations of the meaning of their experiences. Psychotics in delusional states often have feelings of religious grandiosity and inflated egotistical importance—they may see themselves, for example, as special emissaries from God, blessed with an important message for the world, or with the spiritual power to heal. Mystical states, on the other hand, usually involve a loss of pride and ego, a quieting of the mind, and an emptying of the self—all of which is required before the mystic can become a suitable vessel for God.⁵⁸

Dr. D'Aquili and his colleagues also considered the possibility that mystical experiences may be forms of hallucinations. After a close scientific examination of these

⁵⁷ Horgan, Loc. 3850-3851.

⁵⁸ Newberg, D'Aquili and Rause, Loc. 1652-1653.

two types of experiences they concluded that mystical experiences and hallucinations differ in significant ways. They write:

Mystical experiences are also set apart, from all hallucinatory states, by the high degree of sensory complexity they usually involve. First, hallucinations usually involve only a single sensory system—a person may see a vision, hear a disembodied voice, or feel a sense of presence, but rarely are multiple senses simultaneously involved. Mystical experiences, on the other hand, tend to be rich, coherent, and deeply dimensioned sensory experiences. They are perceived with the same, and in some cases increased, degree of sensory complexity with which we experience “ordinary” states of mind. In plainest terms, they simply feel very real.⁵⁹

What is Mystical Experience?

Mystical experiences have been studied by a variety of people. Among the early explorers of mysticism are William James,⁶⁰ the American philosopher and psychologist, as well as Evelyn Underhill,⁶¹ an English spiritual writer and Roman Catholic. In many ways these two set the stage for later scholars such as Houston Smith and Steven Katz (both scholars’ ideas are explored in this Guidebook).⁶² Today theologians and writers

⁵⁹ Ibid., Loc 1681-1686.

⁶⁰ In his book *The Variety of Religious Experience*, William James claims that mystical experiences have “four marks” (see page 380). He argues that such experiences are Ineffable (beyond language), Noetic (they provide one with a sense of knowing), Transient (they last a short time), and Passive (they occur on their own and cannot be controlled).

⁶¹ Evelyn Underhill in her book, *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Spiritual Consciousness*, sets forth “four rules” or “notes which may be applied as tests” to help identify mystical experiences (see page 81 of her book). These tests are: (1) These experiences must be active and practical (meaning they involve the whole person and not just the intellect); (2) they must be transcendental and spiritual (these experiences, she claims, are focused on what she describes as the “changeless One” and not this world); (3) This One, she goes on to claim, is for the mystic the “Reality of it all” and the object of love; (4) finally these experiences should be transformative in that the person attempts to transform the self in order to live in union with this One reality they have experienced. Underhill refers to this transformative process as the “Mystic Way.”

⁶² Another description of the common features found in mystical experiences can be found in Jess Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996). Hollenback lists “seven distinctive attributes” that he believes distinguish mystical experiences from other types of human experience:

specializing in religion and spirituality have attempted to explore mystical experiences; moreover, mysticism has also been studied by scholars such as Eugene d'Aquili and Stanislov Grof who have explored mysticism from a psychological and neurological perspective.

Nonetheless, within academic circles there are essentially two major approaches to describing mystical experience: One we can describe as Constructionism and the other as Perennialism.⁶³ Let us very briefly look at these individually:

THE CONSTRUCTIONIST APPROACH: Championed by the Philosopher of Religion Steven Katz in his 1978 study, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, this approach is based on a theory in sociology referred to as Social Constructionism.⁶⁴ According to this approach, human beings rationalize their experience (whether the external or physical

1. The mystical experience is a radical, trans-sensory metamorphosis of the subject's mode of consciousness that takes place while he or she is awake. 2. It is a mode of consciousness that gives the subject both privileged access to and knowledge of those things that his or her particular culture and religious tradition regards as ultimately real. In other words, it is no mere "perception" of another domain of experience—it is a revelation that concerns those things that are of supreme ontological significance for that individual's particular cultural and religious community. 3. It is an experience that gives the subject privileged knowledge about those matters that his or her religious tradition considers to have the utmost importance for human salvation. In other words, it gives mystics knowledge about matters that are of ultimate soteriological concern to their communities. This is yet another sense in which the mystical experience is not mere "perception" but rather something that compels a response to it with all of one's being. 4. It is heavily laden with affect. 5. It is an illumination that is both literal and metaphorical. 6. It is fundamentally amorphous and its content historically conditioned. The mystical experience is amorphous insofar as it has no predetermined form. The particular images, insights, emotional states, and volitions that it generates derive most of their specific character and intensity from religious and philosophical assumptions that the mystics bring with them into the experience prior to its onset. Moreover, the content of each mystic's experience validates the mythology or metaphysic that he or she takes for granted as being self-evidently true. In other words, there is not only an essential contextuality to the mystical experience but also a reciprocal interdependency between the presuppositions that underlie a mystic's interpretation of his or her experience and the content of that experience. For this reason, it is inappropriate to speak of either the experience or its interpretation as though one were epistemologically prior to the other. 7. It is a mode of experience that usually has its genesis in the recollective act.

⁶³ This analysis relied on the work of F. Samuel Brainard, "Defining Mystical Experience," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 64, no. 2 (Summer 1996): 359-393.

⁶⁴ Steven Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis* Katz (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

world or the internal or spiritual experience) by creating in their minds a linguistic (language-based) model of that world. Since language is influenced by culture, time, and other social and individual factors, our interpretation of reality is by definition mediated by our social context. According to constructionist understanding of mystical experience, there is no such thing as a universal mystical experience. All mystical experiences are different and unique. In fact, the very concept of mystical experience may prove to be a social construct, and as such have no real existence except as a way of rationalizing or understanding experience.

Constructionists point to the profound differences that exist in mystical experiences, some are unitive (such as mystical union with God in some Christian traditions), but others are not (as the experience of many deities and spirits in Santeria and other shamanic traditions). Moreover, in some cases mystics report an experience of God, in others an experience of nothingness. There is no such thing as mystical experience (singular) there is only a multitude of unrelated experiences that cannot be reduced to one explanation or interpretation.

Moreover, constructionists point to how within the great religious and spiritual traditions ultimate reality has been defined as God, Consciousness, The First Principle, The Ultimate Truth, the Great Source of Being, God-Head, Brahma, the Tao, Being itself, Buddha-nature, Nothingness, Emptiness...the list goes on. Within religious traditions ultimate reality has been defined as: a personal, all-knowing and all-powerful God (the Abrahamic Traditions); an impersonal being (as in some forms of deism); an eternal truth, principal, or law that brought everything into existence and/or governs the universe (as in Taoism); finally, some have concluded that all these definitions of ultimate reality

constitute different manifestation of the same reality (the interspiritual approach). It is a feat of ridiculous reductionism, constructionists believe, to attempt to redefine all these culturally nuanced propositions to one concept. Steven Katz writes that taking “descriptions of mystic experience out of their total context...sever all grounds of their intelligibility.”⁶⁵

Constructionists speak to how the world’s great religious and spiritual traditions seem to hold not only different language but remarkably different ideas on what constitutes ultimate reality. For example, in some forms of Buddhism there is a complete absence of any kind of transcendent deity, while in the monotheistic religions there is a personal God. On the other hand, even the three great monotheistic religions of the world state seemingly conflicting positions concerning the nature of God (or ultimate reality). For example in some forms of Christianity there is a God that expresses itself in three divine persons (the Holy Trinity), while for some in Judaism and Islam this concept is seen as a wholly unacceptable form of polytheism.

As a result, writes F. Samuel Brainard, describing the constructionist position in his article “Defining ‘Mystical Experience’,” “there is no real universal referent for the term ‘mystical experience . . . the category ‘mystical’ is a linguistic artifact and should not be confused with real experiences themselves that are culturally conditioned and fundamentally different from tradition to tradition”⁶⁶

THE PERENNIAL APPROACH: This is the approach taken by Aldous Huxley, and in more modern times Houston Smith and Ken Wilber. This perspective holds that all

⁶⁵ Katz, *Mysticism and Philosophical Analysis*, 47.

⁶⁶ Brainard, 362.

mystical experiences, while differing wildly in the way that they may be described and interpreted, are essentially expressions of an enduring and singular (in other words, perennial) reality or truth. The perennial approach, although unpopular in most scholarly or academic circles, is the approach taken by most interspiritual practitioners. (See the Guidebook section entitled *The Perennial Philosophy* for a fuller treatment of this idea.)

The Qualities of Mystical Experience

Whatever approach one takes to describe and understand mystical experiences, one thing is relatively clear, there is a phenomenon or a host of phenomena that have been defined as mystical in nature. So what are the characteristics of mystical experience? After exploring numerous academic studies and books on mysticism I have found that nearly all descriptions of mystical experiences are said to possess one or more of the following qualities:

- The Sense of Selflessness: Many people who have had mystical experiences report a loss of the sense of separate distinct self or personal identity (a sense of egoless existence).
- The Sense of Dissolution: Some people who have had these experiences also claim that they felt absorbed into something greater (a more complete and all-encompassing reality).
- The Sense of Non-Duality: During mystical experiences people have also reported a feeling that “everything is one.”
- The Sense of Universal-Consciousness: People have also reported feeling that inanimate objects possess consciousness, people have felt that plants, flowers, trees, the earth, even the cosmos possess consciousness.
- The Sense of Timelessness and Spaciousness: People have also had a sense that time and space change; many people report that they feel that the mystical experience occurs outside the normal boundaries of space and time.

- A Sense of Noetic Value: Mystical experiences have also left people with a sense that the experience is a source of profound knowledge, truth, or wisdom.
- The Sense of Purpose and Meaning: Some people were also left with a feeling that creation, life, and even their personal existence had a deep and real purpose and meaning.
- The Sense of the Ineffable: Many people have also felt that there is a quality to the experience that makes it difficult or impossible to describe in normal language.
- The Sense of Bliss: Many have also reported that the mystical experience left them with an overwhelming sense of joy; and in some cases a feeling that “all is as it should be.”
- The Sense of Sacredness or the Holy: Many people who have had mystical experience have been left with a sense that the experience seemed intrinsically sacred or holy.
- A Sense of Paranormal Ability: Some mystics have reported unique capabilities during the mystic state like the ability to be at two places at the same time (bi-location) or the ability to transport their consciousness beyond their bodies (astral-projection).⁶⁷
- The Sense of Urgency: Finally, some people were left with a feeling that they had to transform their lives, often for the purpose of ensuring on-going communion with the reality they experienced within the mystical state.

Interspirituality and the Centrality of Consciousness

Consciousness is a fundamental thing, the fundamental thing in existence it is the energy, the motion, the movement of consciousness that creates the universe and all that is in it not only the macrocosm but the microcosm is nothing but consciousness arranging itself. For instance, when consciousness in its movement or rather a certain stress of movement forgets itself in the action it becomes an apparently “unconscious” energy; when it forgets itself in the form it becomes the electron, the atom, the material object. In reality it is still consciousness that works in the energy and determines the form and the evolution of form. When it wants to liberate itself, slowly, evolutionarily, out of Matter,

⁶⁷ For an excellent exploration of this type of mystical experience see Jess Hollenback, *Mysticism: Experience, Response, and Empowerment* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996).

*but still in the form, it emerges as life, as animal, as man and it can go on evolving itself still farther out of its involution and become something more than mere man.*⁶⁸

As we found when defining interspirituality, consciousness plays a central role in interspiritual thinking. The primary objective of interspiritual practice is the transformation of both personal and communal consciousness. In this idea we find the influence of Eastern religious thought on the development of interspirituality. It has been said that while western religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) focus on perfecting character, the eastern religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, Daoism) focus on transforming consciousness.

This, of course, raises a question, “What is consciousness?” Both scientifically and philosophically this question remains one of the central issues of our time.⁶⁹ Consciousness has a host of definitions; to some theorists it is said to deal exclusively with subjectivity and the interior life (thoughts, memories, feelings, etc.), others believe it is about perception and phenomenological reality; some theorists focus on knowledge, while still others focus on intentionality. For our purposes we will define consciousness as the awareness and core of being in the human person. (It must be kept in mind that in western science consciousness is a by-product of the brain. On the other hand, some thinkers in the Advaita Vedanta school of Hinduism suggest that consciousness is being itself.)

It should be noted, there is no consensus in the interspiritual community regarding theories of consciousness. So what will be presented here are some, but certainly not all,

⁶⁸ Aurobindo, *Sri Aurobindo: The Life Divine*, vol. 18-19 (Pondicherry: Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1970), 236-7.

⁶⁹ For an excellent exploration of the topic see, Robert van Gulick, “Consciousness,” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2004. Exploring this broad and complex topic does not fall within the scope of this *Guidebook*.

of the major ideas circulating in interspiritual circles. Many of these ideas have been deeply influenced by Integral Theorists, most notably Ken Wilber.⁷⁰ Nevertheless, not all interspiritual practitioners accept integral theory as central to their belief and practices. Nonetheless there are such a significant number of interspiritual practitioners and thought leaders who reference integral theory to make this chapter necessary in this Guidebook.

One way that consciousness enters the interspiritual dialogue is through the “integral” approach to spirituality first proposed by Sri Aurobindo (August 15, 1872 – December 5, 1950). The term first appeared in Aurobindo’s book *The Synthesis of Yoga*. A highly regarded Indian nationalist leader, philosopher, spiritual teacher, and poet, Aurobindo used the term “integral” to describe his own philosophy, which he also referred to as “full” or “complete” yoga. It is argued that before Aurobindo the practice of yoga primarily focused on the transformation and liberation of the spiritual dimension of the human person (which entailed liberation of soul from the body or of consciousness from the lower creation).

Aurobindo’s teaching was “integral,” “full,” or “complete,” because he argued that his yoga initiated a process that transformed and united all parts of a human person with the Divine; Aurobindo argued that the spirit, mind, emotions, body, and soul are all meant to go through a “divine transformation.” In other words, he believed that all creation, both the spiritual and the material, are manifestations of the Divine. Creation, therefore, is not something to be transcended (in a sense discarded). As a manifestation of

⁷⁰ Ken Wilber has written extensively on a host of topics. Among his major works which have influenced interspiritual thinking are: *The Spectrum of Consciousness*, 1977; *No Boundary: Eastern and Western Approaches to Personal Growth*, 1979; *Sex, Ecology, Spirituality: The Spirit of Evolution*, 1995; *A Brief History of Everything*, 1996; *Integral Psychology: Consciousness, Spirit, Psychology*, 2000; *A Theory of Everything: An Integral Vision for Business, Politics, Science and Spirituality*, 2000; *Integral Spirituality: A Startling New Role for Religion in the Modern and Postmodern World*, 2006.

Divinity, creation has a powerful role to play. Aurobindo proposed that creation is the foundation where through an evolutionary process divine consciousness fully manifests.

Aurobindo established many ideas that have influenced the development of modern integral thinking and interspirituality.⁷¹ These ideas can be summarized in the following way:

- The Universe is a manifestation of Divine Consciousness. Sri Aurobindo writes in his book *The Divine Life*, “Consciousness is...the fundamental thing in existence it is the energy, the motion, the movement of consciousness that creates the universe and all that is in it; not only the macrocosm but the microcosm is nothing but consciousness arranging itself.”⁷² It should be noted; the idea that Divine Consciousness is both the source and foundation of creation has been long prevalent in Hindu philosophy. As early as the 8th century Adi Shankara established Advaita Vedanta, a consolidation of Hindu philosophy, that established the idea that all creation is a manifestation of One Unified Divine Consciousness.⁷³
- The purpose of the spiritual path is to achieve complete union with and ensure the whole and perfect manifestation of the Divine.
- To achieve this union the person must undergo a “divine transformation.” According to Aurobindo this divine transformation is a function of three stages. At the first stage the person aspires to divine transformation, rejects anything that would prevent this transformation, and surrenders to the divine. The second stage is defined as “transitional,” at this stage the person purifies the self as more and more the person responds to the divine and the divine responds to the individual. Finally at the third stage the Divine completely

⁷¹ Aurobindo, 5.

⁷² Ibid., 236.

⁷³ For an excellent exploration of this religious history see Wendy Doniger, *The Hindus: An Alternative History* (New York: Penguin Group. 2009).

controls the individual person. He writes, “In the last period there is no effort at all, no set method, no fixed Sadhana [dedicated practice]; the place of endeavor...will be taken by a natural, simple, powerful and happy disclosing of the flower of the Divine out of the bud of a purified and perfected terrestrial nature.”⁷⁴

- All creation, both the “material” and the “spiritual,” are manifestation of Divine Consciousness. Therefore, this transformation must be integral in the sense that it must involve the whole of the human person: intellect, emotions, body, spirit, and soul.
- This transformation of the human person is a transformation of creation itself.
- The whole purpose of creation is the manifestation of Divine consciousness in creation; in other words, evolution is purposeful.

A Theory of Consciousness

As stated earlier, the transformation of consciousness plays a central role in interspirituality. As a result, a theory of consciousness proves necessary. In other words, one of the necessary elements to a comprehensive interspiritual approach to spirituality is a theory defining consciousness and its inner workings. If one seeks to transform consciousness one needs to know how it works, how it evolves, and how one can develop it.

While there are various theories that purport to describe how consciousness works or how it manifests, there are very few, accepted by most interspiritual practitioners and thought leaders, which clearly describe what consciousness is. Some interspiritual practitioners, borrowing heavily from Eastern religion and philosophy, will simply define consciousness as the ground of being and the source of all that is. Others simply say it is

⁷⁴ Aurobindo, *The Synthesis of Yoga* (Pondichéry, Sri Aurobindo Ashram, 1948), 80-81.

reality itself. Nonetheless, even these statements beg the question: What is Consciousness? And this major question is beyond the scope of this Guidebook to adequately answer.

As stated earlier, Sri Aurobindo provides a theory of consciousness in his philosophy. With Aurobindo's work as intellectual foundation, numerous thinkers began to work on a broader theory of consciousness, one that reconciled Eastern understanding of consciousness with Western science of mind. Within interspiritual circles, one of the most popular theories attempting this integration is the work of Ken Wilber and his associates who developed Integral Theory.

Integral Theory: All Quadrants All Levels

Ken Wilber was born in 1949 in Oklahoma City. In the late sixties as a pre-med student at Duke University he developed an intense interest in Eastern philosophy and religion, a popular pursuit among college students at that time. He soon left Duke and enrolled in the University of Nebraska, but after a few years of study there he became disenchanted with academic work and dropped out to explore his personal intellectual interest in religion, spirituality, science and evolution, and consciousness studies.

Wilber's exploration led to his development of a model of consciousness he termed AQAL, pronounced "ay-kwal." This model forms the basic framework of his Integral Theory, and is based on earlier work done by Sri Aurobindo. In fact it should be noted, Wilber's work is often described as an "integration," "summation," or "synthesis" of earlier work done by other thinkers and scholars. His originality is grounded not in any novel discovery, new invention, or original idea, but in his ability to bring the distinct and apparently unrelated work done by others and unite them into a coherent and comprehensive whole.

AQAL stands for All Quadrants All Levels. The model posits that all human knowledge and experience can be placed in a four-quadrant grid (see graphic), along the axes of “interior-exterior” and “individual-collective.”⁷⁵ Simply put, Wilber is theorizing that (1) everything possesses consciousness (like Aurobindo he at times suggests that consciousness is reality) and (2) consciousness expresses itself in a manner that can be categorized in this manner:



Graphic is from Wake Up, The AQAL Matrix Has You: AQAL Matrix Revolution

In his book, *A Theory of Everything* (first published in 2000), Wilber claims that his AQAL model is one of the most comprehensive approaches to consciousness and reality. Wilber is attempting to explain how every form of knowledge and experience fits coherently together. In order for any account of reality to be complete, one must be able

⁷⁵ There are many critics of Wilber’s work. The most serious of these critics claim that it does not actually define what consciousness is. They also claim that the theory does not explain the fundamental relationship between the four quadrants. Some critics claim that the theory does not adequately explain the process by which consciousness evolves. (Wilber does argue that evolution requires changes in all four quadrants, but critics argue, he never clearly describes the causal connections and laws that govern this evolution.) Many have also argued that Wilber’s thinking is too masculinist, hierarchical, categorizing, and empty of an understanding of the power and place of emotions and mystery. One interspiritual practitioner put it this way, “Wilber turns spirituality into engineering.”

to describe all four elements of that reality: The personal internal (I: intentional), the personal external (It: behavioral), the collective internal (We: cultural or values), and finally the collective external (Its: scientific or social). Only such a description of reality can be said to be complete. For Wilber, only such an account can be accurately called “integral.” In other words, such an account is *integral* or *complete* because it includes all possible perspectives; in other words, it is inclusive of all possible manifestations of reality or consciousness. To understand AQAL is to understand how consciousness works, how it evolves, and how it can be developed. Wilber would argue, if you want to transform consciousness then understand AQAL.

AQAL is based on four major concepts and a so-called rest-category. Integral Theorist have written the following about these five categories: “These 5 elements are not merely theoretical concepts; they are aspects of your own experience, contours of your own consciousness, as you can easily verify for yourself.”⁷⁶

The following are the AQAL four major concepts and rest-category.

- Quadrants: The four quadrants are the foundational concept of Wilber’s Integral model. The model simply holds that reality and consciousness are inextricably linked; as a result, all reality, all phenomena, all manifestations of consciousness, can be seen from four different perspectives: (1) within (subjective, interior perspective) and (2) from the outside (objective, exterior perspective), and from an (3) individual or a (4) collective perspective.⁷⁷

Each of the four perspectives has a truth to offer. For example, take a woman who has suffered a tragedy. Let us say her daughter was shot by another teenager who stole a gun from his father.

⁷⁶ See *Integral Naked: Introduction to Integral Theory and Practice*, 2003
<http://in.integralinstitute.org/pdf/E122CFD2-03E0-40e1-BA1D-B2A37D2E216E.pdf>.

⁷⁷ See Wilber, *A Theory of Everything*.

- Interior individual accounts (upper-left quadrant): There is the individual pain of the woman who has suffered this horrible loss. (We call this the individual intentional/ this is also the spiritual realm.)
- Interior plural accounts (lower-left): There is the collective shock, hurt, and outrage of the community that has been affected by this tragedy made manifest by their collective actions. (We call this the cultural.)
- Exterior individual accounts (upper-right): There are also the actions taken by the mother. (We call this the behavioral.)
- Exterior plural accounts (lower-right): Finally there will be theories and statistics about gun violence and teenage behaviors. (We call this the social/ and also the scientific.)

Moreover, what is true of the victim's mother is also true of every other person affected by the story...they too are going through this four sided manifestation of reality to consciousness. According to Wilber all four of these perspectives (for every person and phenomena in the story) are real and necessary for a complete (an integral) understanding and appreciation of the situation. He suggests that all four perspectives offer complementary, rather than contradictory, perspectives. In other words, it is possible for all to be correct, and all are necessary for a complete account of human existence. Finally, and this is very important, each perspective on its own offers only a partial view of reality.

According to Integral Theorists modern western society has a pathological focus on the exterior or objective perspective. The natural science (and much of modern social science) has a singular focus on the measurable, the objective. Such perspectives value that which can be measured and tested in a laboratory. Wilber and Integral Theorist hold

that this perspective denies the value of the left sides (subjectivity, individual experience, feelings, values, and religious and spiritual experiences). It treats the left side as unproven or having no meaning. Wilber identifies this as a fundamental cause of society's malaise, and names the situation resulting from such perspectives, "flatland."⁷⁸ It is flat because it lacks the rich depth of the interior, subjective perspective. Writing of the effects of this flat viewpoint, Richard Slaughter states:

The consequences were devastating. Individuals and cultures were stripped of inner meaning and the external world (including the global ecology) was rendered into a set of things, mere resources. Consequently the world of modernity was built on an illusion: the illusion that only half of reality mattered: the external, objective, measurable part. In human terms, the achievement and the disaster of the modern world is the disengaged ego. The cry "no more myths" led to the abandonment of any possibility of further development and to the 'disenchantment' of self and the world.⁷⁹

- States of Consciousness: States of consciousness are quite familiar; they include waking, body-sensation, dreaming, meditative states, and deep sleep. States can also be induced through drugs and other methods. Wilber states that higher or "peak" states of consciousness can be experienced and that these are indications or hints of higher possible levels of consciousness (see below). States of consciousness are temporary.
- Stages (or Levels) of Consciousness: Wilber was deeply influenced by developmental psychology and he borrowed several so-called stage theories (which postulated several *stages* of human development) to develop his "levels of consciousness." According to Wilber these levels are the stages of human development from pre-personal (subconscious motivations), through personal (conscious mental processes) and finally transpersonal (these are stages of

⁷⁸ See Ken Wilber, *A Theory of Everything*. See also the excellent paper by Richard A. Slaughter, "Transcending Flatland – Implications of Ken Wilber's Meta-narrative for Futures Studies," *Futures* 30, no. 6 (August 1998): 519–533.

⁷⁹ Slaughter, 519.

consciousness that are integrative and mystical). Each of these major stages of consciousness has various minor stages within it. It should be noted, that while states of consciousness are temporary (one can be walking one moment then sleeping the next) stages of consciousness are permanent. Each stage represents a level of human growth and evolution.

Wilber and other integral theorists have argued that not only individuals but collectives (tribes, cities, and nation-states) also manifest stages of development. Integralists have looked to the works of people like Jean Gebser and Don Beck (who developed Spiral Dynamics, see below) who have argued that human beings both individually and collectively manifest various stages of development. In each of these stages, consciousness experiences more and more of the truth of reality. (See the section in this Guidebook entitled “Consciousness, Evolution and Human Life.”)

- **Lines of Development:** Lines of development are the various “intelligences” that a human person possesses; these include cognitive (intellectual), emotional (affective), ethical, aesthetic, spiritual, kinesthetic (physical), musical, spatial, and logical-mathematical. High development in one of these intelligences does not imply development in another; for example, one can be cognitively highly developed and emotionally immature.
- **Types:** Types has been called a “rest category.” Within this category Wilber places various forms of categorizations that do not fit into Quadrants, Levels, Lines, and States. Examples of type are the enneagram, Carl Jung’s archetypes, or the concept of masculine/ feminine. Types categorize people, usually, using various elements of consciousness (Quadrants, Levels, Lines, and States).

What is the value of this theory? Wilber’s work and the work of integral thinkers provide interspiritual practitioners with a tool. This tool, this model of consciousness, suggests the following:

- The quadrants concept tells us that individual, internal experiences (which are the core experiences of spirituality) are valuable markers of reality, and essential for a full expression of consciousness. They are aspects of truth. To discard or devalue them leaves any description or theory of reality and consciousness incomplete, misleading, and potentially harmful. It also leaves one disconnected from valuable aspects of consciousness such as the emotions, a sense of personal truth, and the transcendent. Richard Slaughter writes, “Questions such as: ‘who am I’ or ‘what are my central needs, purposes’ become very difficult to pose.”⁸⁰
- The quadrants concept also tells us that nearly all theories and perspectives have some truth value, although most probably they are not the complete truth. Theology (and spirituality), the natural sciences, the social sciences, and the humanities, all express an incomplete but valuable aspect of reality. Hence integral theory provides an intellectual foundation for interspirituality. It does so in the following sense: interspirituality holds that all the world’s faith traditions have “truth value.” Integral theory teaches that in fact nearly all the enduring philosophies do indeed have “truth value” in so far as they provide a perspective that is descriptive of (1) individual interior truth, (2) individual exterior truth, (3) collective interior truth, (4) collective exterior truth, or some mixture of these. Integral theory provides an intellectual foundation from which to understand the perspective of all the world’s faiths.
- The stages of consciousness suggest that humans develop along a path of growth that includes higher levels of integrated being which are defined by compassion, wisdom, and peace akin to the teachings of most of the world’s great religious traditions. Moreover, the theory also holds that not only individuals but communities (tribes, cities, nations, etc.) also go through stages of development. (See the section entitled “Consciousness, Evolution and Human Life” in this guidebook.)

⁸⁰ Slaughter, 520.

- The lines of development suggest that to become fully mature a person must develop various aspects of his being: the intellectual, emotional, physical, ethical, spiritual, etc. Growth and maturation is a multi-dimensional activity. In this model, it is possible to have someone with profound spiritual insights who at the very same time is sexually immature or completely unethical.
- A core principle of the theory is the idea that Reality and consciousness are inextricably linked. Wilber writes,
 - We therefore reach a startling conclusion. Since modes of knowing correspond with levels of consciousness, and since Reality is a particular mode of knowing, it follows that Reality is a level of consciousness. This, however, does not mean that the “stuff” of reality is “consciousness-stuff,” or that “material objects” are really made of consciousness, or that consciousness is some nebulous cloud of undifferentiated goo. It means only—and here we must temporarily lapse back into dualistic language—that Reality is what is revealed from the non-dual level of consciousness that we have termed Mind. That it is revealed is a matter of experimental fact; what is revealed, however, cannot be accurately described without reverting to the symbolic mode of knowing. Thus do we maintain that reality is not ideal, it is not material, it is not spiritual, it is not concrete, it is not mechanistic, it is not vitalistic—Reality is a level of consciousness, and this level alone is Real.⁸¹
- The on-going manifestation and development of consciousness is the primary purpose of evolution. This is known as the *developmental theory of history*. According to this theory, history — and hence evolution — is occurring purposefully. It is not simply the product of random occurrences or chance. History and evolution have a purpose, plan and/or goal. (Please note: The developmental theory of history is not accepted within most academic circles and is in complete opposition to the generally accepted view of evolution.)
- The transformation of consciousness is the complex product of change at the individual and collective levels, both internally and externally. In other words, the

⁸¹ Ken Wilber, *The Spectrum of Consciousness* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2012), Kindle Edition: Location 1153-1157.

transformation of consciousness of one person has powerful implications for all of reality.

- If in fact the goal of interspiritual practice is the transformation of consciousness, having a map of consciousness can be very helpful. Using AQAL an interspiritual practitioner can more easily understand the various elements of his/ her reality, uncover places requiring work, and focus on those challenges or blocks to personal growth and development. In short, he/she can accelerate his/her evolution.
- Finally, Integral Theory seeks to reconcile science and spirituality. It attempts to provide a model that purports to show that every theory in the natural sciences and social sciences, along with all the philosophies and spiritual wisdoms, fit into a somewhat coherent platform, each serving its own, incomplete, but necessary purpose. This is why the model has been called the Integral Operating System (IOS) because like an operating system within a computer, the Integral Model, its proponents suggest, allows for all knowledge and experience (all manifestations of consciousness) to be used in a manner most effective and efficient to its purpose.

Consciousness, Evolution, and Human Life

One of the major ideas permeating the interspiritual community is the idea that consciousness is evolving. In fact, this evolution, many interspiritual thought leaders believe, is the primary goal or purpose of life itself. Integral theorists believe that through evolution human beings achieve higher and higher stages of consciousness. In other words, people mature along a path that allows them to incorporate, embrace, and deal with more and more of reality. And this is true of both the individual person and of communities of people. Collective consciousness is also evolving posit many interspiritual practitioners and integral theorists. One of the major concepts that has been used to model this thinking is Spiral Dynamics.

According to Don Beck and other Spiral Dynamic theorists, human consciousness moves through stages of evolution (which some theorists have speculated may be related to evolutionary changes in the physical brain). Each of these stages manifests certain beliefs, social groupings, motivation patterns, organizational dynamics, and goals. The model suggests that any leader that attempts to impose policies or ideas that are too far beyond the capacity of the community will experience alienation and rebellion rather than transformation.

To explain these evolutionary stages, which they believe can be seen throughout human history, they created a color coded model. They used colors in order to empty the model of a sense of value judgment. While each stage represents different challenges to the human person, none of the stages is “bad,” “evil,” or “degenerate.” In fact each stage is necessary for the higher stages to evolve. Each color represents a different stage of consciousness: ⁸²

- Beige: Survivalist. Not generally that active today, but the primary mode of consciousness during the Semi-Stone Age. It is dominated by nature and basic survival instincts; humans act much as other animals. Results in loose, clan-based survival groups.
- Purple: Tribal. People at this stage of development are prone to magical thinking; people living at the purple stage are close to the earth. In this stage people focus on rituals to appease ancestral spirits. Management of purple demands respect for clan rules and allegiances, respect to the clan “leaders.” Change must be embodied in rituals, traditions, and symbols.

⁸² The following description of Spiral Dynamic Theory comes from Steve Dinan, “Summary of Spiral Dynamics,” review of *Spiral Dynamics*, by Don Beck and Christopher Cowan, The Esalen Institute, 1999, http://www.spiraldynamics.com/book/SDreview_Dinan.htm? (accessed February 27, 2016).

- Red: Feudal. At this stage of development human life is rough, harsh, power driven, and dominated by a rugged authoritarianism; these societies institutionalize slavery and the exploitation of unskilled labor. Generally run by an all-powerful “dictator.” Society is based on the assumption that people are lazy and must be forced to work. True leaders must suppress natural human tendencies. Currently evident in street life and gangs in inner cities. Motivated by “heroes” and conquest.
- Blue: Authoritarian. At this stage of development people are loyal to truth, which is defined by social grouping. These societies are purposeful and patriotic, they lead people to obey authority, and feel guilty when not conforming to group norms. People try to serve the greater good through self-sacrifice. Works very well in industrial economies. Discipline is strict but usually fair and often public. Organizational structure is pyramidal.
- Orange: Entrepreneurial. The stage focuses on personal success, each person rationally calculating what is to their personal advantage. People are largely motivated by economic gain; people are responsive to perks, bonuses, money rather than loyalty, group belongingness, or life employment. Rational capacities allow people to test many options. Competition improves productivity and fosters growth. This is probably the dominant stage of consciousness in the United States today. Main concerns are autonomy and manipulation of the environment. Usually results in free market economy and multi-party democracy.
- Green: Communitarian. At this stage people manifest a consciousness defined by sensitivity and concern for others. (In his book *Boomerities. A Novel That Will Set You Free!* (2002), Ken Wilber speculated that the 60s were a Green era.) At the green stage of development the focus is community and personal growth, equality, attention to environmental concerns. Work is motivated by human contact and contribution, learning from others. Being liked is more important than competitive advantage, value openness and trust, fear rejection and disapproval. Leaders become facilitators, less autocratic. Hierarchies blur in the move towards egalitarianism with a resulting tendency towards inefficiency and stagnation.

- Yellow: Systemic. This is the first stage of consciousness of the second tier in which there is a quantum shift in the capacity to take multiple perspectives in life. At this stage of development people are motivated by learning for its own sake and find it easy to integrate complex systems and ideas. Change is a welcome part of the process. It is characterized by systems thinking, an orientation to how parts interact to create a greater whole. Unique talents and dispositions are honored as contributing something valuable to the whole.
- Turquoise: Integral. Focused on a global integration, attuned to the delicate balance of interlocking life forces. Work must be meaningful to the overall health of life. There is an integration of intellect and feelings. This is the “integral” stage of development; people working at this stage of development are able to see and honor many perspectives, including many of the “lower” colors.

The implications of Spiral Dynamics Theory scientifically, politically, economically, and even spiritually are very significant. Nonetheless, for interspirituality the following are some of the major takeaways:

- As Sri Aurobindo proposed, evolution, and hence history, are purposeful.
- The purpose of evolution is evident in history, namely the on-going manifestation of higher stages of consciousness.
- The transformation of consciousness has profound historical consequences. With each new stage of development consciousness is transformed. In other words, if one recalls the integral theory presented earlier in this Guidebook, all four quadrants (all four ways that consciousness manifests in human life) undergo major change:
 - Interior individual accounts (upper-left quadrant): The realm of individual self-perception, personal identity, and intention are transformed as new ways of thinking emerge.

- Interior plural accounts (lower-left): Culture is changed. And different values or criteria for what is important develop.
- Exterior individual accounts (upper-right): People begin to behave differently.
- Exterior plural accounts (lower-right): Social life is transformed as new ways of decision-making take shape.
- Therefore, the transformation of individual consciousness that is the goal of interspiritual practice has profound consequences, as it has the promise of transforming all of human life.

Interspirituality and Sacred Texts

When reflecting on interreligious hermeneutics [the interpretation of sacred texts], we ought to consider this paradoxical nature of our present religious landscape: Religious otherness is omnipresent in our lives today, not merely as a subject for discussion in our schools and universities, but also as a challenge on our streets, on television screens, at work, and at play— everywhere.⁸³

Sacred Texts

Spiritual practice often includes a search for meaning, truth, and a personal encounter with the deepest reality. The interspiritual person undertakes this search within the whole of humanity's spiritual heritage. In other words, the interspiritual practitioner is not limited by personal religious affiliation or background, family tradition or culture, or communal norms. For the interspiritual practitioner the entire human reservoir of sacred teachings and wisdom traditions become his/her spiritual garden to explore and learn from. And within this garden few flowers bloom more powerfully as the remarkable collection of sacred texts that spring out of world's religions and wisdom traditions.

⁸³ Catherine Cornille and Christopher Conway, *Interreligious Hermeneutics* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), Kindle Edition: 45.

During the course of the writing of this Guidebook interspiritual practitioners spoke of a host of sacred texts which they looked to for spiritual guidance. The following are among the most popular:

- **A Course in Miracles**

A Course in Miracles (ACM) was written between 1965 and 1971 by Helen Schucman, who claimed that an inner voice, which she identified as “Jesus,” guided her writing. Its purpose is to help bring about a “spiritual transformation” in the reader. The book consists of three sections, Text, Workbook, and Manual for Teachers. Like most sacred texts, ACM is complex; some of its primary teachings include a belief in non-dualism and a deep commitment to the practice of forgiveness as a path to wholeness.

- **I Ching**

Known as the Book of Changes, it is one of the most widely read Chinese texts. While the I Ching is primarily known as a tool for divination or fortune telling, it was intended as a source of spiritual guidance. Its philosophical outlook is based on belief in the power of balance, the sense that all events are the product of evolution, and the inevitability of change.

- **Islamic Sacred Scriptures**

The Qur’an

Within Islam, the Qur’an is considered to be the absolute and infallible word of Allah. The Qur’an consists of 114 chapters, each known as sura. It initially didn’t exist in a written form (the word Qur’an is derived from Arab for “to recite”) and was composed about 20 years after Prophet Muhammad’s death in 632. He, according to Muslim belief, received the word of God through angel Gabriel over a period of twenty-three years.

The Hadith

The Hadith (Arabic for “narrative” or “report”) is considered second in authority only to the Qur’an in Islam. Although not regarded as the spoken Word of God like the Qur’an, the Hadith is an important source of Islamic doctrine, law, and

practice. The Hadith are records of the Prophet Mohammed's life, actions, and deeds. Sayings in the Hadith (called a sunnah) were transmitted by word of mouth first by Muhammad's companions and then later by subsequent Muslims. The Hadith are considered by most Muslims to be an important source of Islamic guidance, and are often referred to in matters of Islamic law or history.

- **Jewish Sacred Scriptures**

Tanakh: The Tanakh is the official canon of the Jewish faith. The traditional Hebrew text is known as the Masoretic Text. Tanakh is an acronym of the first Hebrew letter of each of the Masoretic Text's three traditional subdivisions: Torah ("Teaching", also known as the Five Books of Moses, see below), Nevi'im ("Prophets") and Ketuvim ("Writings")—hence TaNaKh. The Tanakh is composed of 39 books which all together form the Jewish Scriptures or Hebrew Bible. These books are said to present the early history of the Jewish people and their covenant with God.

Torah:

According to tradition, the Torah (the first five books of the Tanakh) was written by Moses at Mount Sinai and the Tabernacle. Today, however, scholars agree that the Torah probably does not have only one author and that it was written down during the so-called Babylonian Captivity in the 6th century BC and finalized in the 2nd century BC. The Torah comprises both written and oral law of Rabbinic Judaism as well as religious teachings.

Talmud:

The Talmud (from a root word meaning "instruction, learning") is a central text of Rabbinic Judaism. The Talmud has two components: the Mishnah, a written compendium of Rabbinic Judaism's Oral Torah and the Gemara an elucidation of the Mishnah that also discusses the Jewish Scriptures. The entire Talmud is over 6,200 pages long and contains the teachings and opinions of thousands of rabbis on a variety of subjects, including Jewish law and ethics, philosophy, customs, and history.

Zohar:

A work of Jewish mysticism, the Zohar is the primary sacred text of the movement known as Kabbalah. It is a group of books including commentary which present a mystical interpretation of the Torah (the five books of Moses). The Zohar provides analysis of Jewish scriptures as well as discussions of mysticism, cosmogony, and psychology. It contains a discussion on the nature of God, the origin and structure of the universe, the nature of souls and redemption, the relationship of Ego to Darkness and “true self” to “The Light of God,” and the relationship between the “universal energy” and man.

- **Sri Guru Granth Sahib**

Regarded by Sikhs as a direct revelation from God, the Guru Granth Sahib consists of 1430 pages that present the spiritual revelations of the ten Gurus (or Prophet-Masters) of Sikhism. It was composed and compiled by the Sikh Gurus themselves. The Gurus, while compiling the text, also included verses of Hindu and Muslim Saints, who believed in unity of God and denounced beliefs systems anathema to Sikhism such as superstition and the Indian caste system. The Guru Granth Sahib is a collection of devotional hymns and poetry which proclaims God, lays stress on meditation on the True Guru (God), and lays down moral and ethical rules for development of the soul, spiritual salvation and unity with God. In Sikhism this sacred text is regarded as the final, sovereign, and everlasting Guru.

- **The Bhagavad-Gita**

The 700-verse Bhagavad Gita was written in the 5th to 2nd century BC and is a part of the famous epic the Mahabharata. In it Krishna (an avatar for the God-Head) teaches Ajuna, a young warrior, the deepest truths of life, among them the power of selfless action. The Gita had a profound influence on several leaders of the Indian independence movement including Mohandas Gandhi, who called the Bhagavad Gita his “spiritual dictionary.”

- **The Buddhist Sutras including the Dhammaphada**

These canonical scriptures, believed to have been taught by Siddhartha Gautama,

the Buddha, are also known as the “Great Treasury of Sutras.” They were written between the 2nd century BC and the 2nd century AD. One of the most well-known sutras is the Lotus Sutra which contains a sermon by Buddha which lays the foundation of Buddhism. The word sutra itself means a thread or line that holds ends together, for the books were initially written on palm leaves and sewn together with thread. The Dhammapadam, which remains one of the most widely known and used of the Buddhist texts, is a collection of what are believed to be the Buddha’s sayings.

- **The Christian Scriptures**

The Christian Scriptures (also known as the Bible) consists of 66 books⁸⁴ divided into the Old Testament consisting of 39 books and the New Testament which consists of 27 books. What the Christian refer to as the Old Testament is in fact the Jewish Scriptures; the New Testament consists of the four gospels which outline the life of Jesus of Nazareth (The Christ), the Book of Acts, which provides a history of the early church, and writings from early Christians, most notably Saint Paul.

- **The Gnostic Gospels**

The Gnostic Gospels is a collection of about 52 ancient texts, written from the 2nd to the 4th century AD. Among the most well-known of the Gnostic Gospels are:

- The Gospel of Mary
- The Gospel of Thomas
- The Gospel of Truth
- The Gospel of Philip
- The Gospel of Judas

These gospels were not found together, but as part of numerous discoveries including the famous Nag Hammadi Library discovery of 1945. They are not part

⁸⁴ The Protestant Bible has 66 Books; however, the Roman Catholic Bible has 73.

of the standard Christian Scriptures (The Bible), and as such are part of what is called the New Testament apocrypha. The word gnostic comes from the Greek word gnosis, meaning “knowledge.” It is now generally believed that most of these gospels were part of an early church movement that believed that salvation lay not in faith in Jesus Christ, but in learning to free oneself from the material world.

- **The Tao Te Ching**

Tao Te Ching is a classic Chinese text that was according to tradition composed around the 6th century BC by the sage Laozi. It has 81 brief chapters and was first composed in a flowing style of calligraphy. Tao Te Ching is the fundamental text of both philosophical and religious Taoism; it also significantly influenced the development of Confucianism and Chan (or Chinese) Buddhism, which later evolved into Zen Buddhism in Japan. The Tao Te Ching explores a range of topics from advice for rulers to practical life lessons for everyday people.

- **The Tibetan Book of the Dead**

Also known as The Bardo Thodol, the Tibetan Book of the Dead’s true name translates into *Liberation Through Hearing During the Intermediate State*. It continues to be the best-known work of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism. This sacred text is said to describe, and is in fact intended to guide one through, the experiences that consciousness goes through after death when it is in the *bardo*, the interval between death and the next rebirth. At death the Bardo Thodol is normally read to the corpse of the deceased with the intention of providing the deceased with guidance in the after-life.

- **The Upanishads**

The Upanishads were probably composed in India between 800 BC and 100 BC and literally translate to “Sittings near, laying siege to a Teacher.” They are comprised of philosophical texts which form the theological basis for Hinduism. The scripture is composed of more than 200 texts though a mere 13 of them are considered primary teachings. The Vedas are considered by Hindus to contain truths revealed to illustrate the nature of ultimate reality; they also describe the

path to human salvation. Although totally distinct from the Vedas, Hindus regard the Upanishads as an extension of the Vedas.

- **The Vedas**

The Vedas (from a root word meaning “knowledge”) are comprised of four ancient Indian texts: Rigveda, Yajurveda, Sama-Veda, and Atharva-Veda. The Vedas are not only the oldest form of Sanskrit literature but also the oldest writings of the Hindu faith. These sacred texts are composed of hymns, divine histories, poems, prayers, and formulas sacred in Hinduism.

Interspiritual Practitioner’s Relationship to Sacred Texts

Sacred texts often perform multiple and influential roles in individual and collective spiritual and religious life. In some cases sacred texts are believed to be divinely inspired (as in the Jewish and Christian scriptures), in others they are believed to be the verbatim word of God (as in the Qur’an). On the other hand, there are scriptures that are believed to be wise statements made by profoundly learned persons (such as the Tao Te Ching in Taoism). However they are defined and interpreted, sacred texts play a host of powerful functions.

- **Source of Beliefs:** Sacred texts act as a source of beliefs, practices, and theology; for example, by establishing the Ten Commandments the Torah helps inspire a theology of law within Judaism; within the Christian Scriptures the Gospels establish the belief in the on-going life of Jesus Christ by speaking of his resurrection; the Bhagavad-Gita speaks of reincarnation helping to establish this belief within Hinduism; A Course in Miracles introduces the practice of forgiveness as a path to personal healing and awakening.
- **Basis of Moral Life:** Sacred texts have also been used to help develop and guide moral life and religious law.
- **Basis of Heritage and Identity:** Sacred texts also assist in passing faith from one generation to another. The written word is one of the most powerful tools for

inter-generational communication. And often the text becomes the basis of communal identity (“People of The Book”). Sacred texts often define the community, its nature, and purpose.

- **Source of Inspiration:** Sacred texts also help to inspire believers; and inspiration motivates action. Inspiration can even provide the passion for personal and/or communal transformation. Through a myriad of complex ways sacred texts can provide the inspirational impetus necessary for personal or collective action leading to change, creativity, conversion.
- **Connection to History:** Some sacred texts connect believers with a history of their faith and traditions. They can give one a sense of belonging to a long-living, historical community.
- **Connection to Sacred Figures:** Sacred texts can also present biographies of a faith’s major figures, helping to engender understanding, respect, as well as love and devotion. For example Jesus Christ in the Gospels or Krishna in The Bhagavad-Gita.
- **Source of On-Going Dialogue:** Finally, sacred texts often form the central core of an on-going, intergenerational, dialogue between believers. At their best, sacred texts can inspire dialogues and debates that help to propel a faith from generation to generation, creating an intellectual vibrancy that energizes and enlivens its believers.

Unlike someone who is loyal to a specific tradition, the interspiritual person is confronted with a host of sacred scriptures, each one with its own history, tradition, truth claims, and assertions of authority. This confluence of texts creates a host of challenges for the interspiritual practitioner:

1. How does an interspiritual person decide that a text is sacred?
2. How do interspiritual practitioners interpret sacred texts?

3. What purpose do sacred texts have in the life of an interspiritual practitioner?

How Does an Interspiritual Person Decide that a Text is Sacred

In the field of religious studies a text's sacredness is often said to be established as part of a collective or social process. The process has both religious aspects to it and sociological elements as well. Nevertheless, it is a communal process that ultimately establishes the sacred status of a given text. For example, within Islam the Qur'an and Hadith are held as sacred texts by all Muslims. Nonetheless, The Qur'an is said to be the Verbatim Word of God, the Hadith, however, are the words of God in the words of the Prophet. Islam establishes the theological context for both texts. And this context clearly establishes that for all purposes the Qur'an takes precedent over the Hadith, and both are sacred.

Within the interspiritual community there is no religious authority, formal theology, or even clearly articulated philosophy that allows for consensus on whether any specific text is sacred or whether sacredness has any meaning when speaking of texts or written documents. There does seem to be a recognition that to the extent sacred is to be used to designate a text, there are multiple expressions and understanding of the sacred. Nevertheless, a clear majority of interspiritual practitioners surveyed and interviewed for this demonstration project articulated a belief that some texts were indeed sacred and that the word sacred signified something that was meaningful, unique, and valuable.

My research suggests that within the interspiritual community the sacredness of specific texts is established in various ways:

- **Sacredness Established by a Religious or Spiritual Tradition:** Some interspiritual practitioners simply accept the designation of a text as sacred by a specific tradition. As stated earlier in this dissertation, at the core of the interspiritual

philosophy lies a deep reverence for all the world's great religious and spiritual traditions. As such interspiritual persons often accept a text as sacred if that is the formally held belief expressed by a religious or spiritual tradition. In other words, they tend to accept the accepted experience of the religious community out of which the text is derived.

- Sacredness Established by its Source: Interspiritual practitioners have also deemed a text sacred by virtue of its source. For example, *The Autobiography of a Yogi* written by Paramhansa Yogananda is revered by many interspiritual practitioners. Many hold the text as sacred because they believe its source, Paramhansa Yogananda, was an enlightened or holy figure inspired and guided by the divine. The book they believe contains divinely inspired wisdom.
- Sacred Established by a Respected Authority: Interspiritual practitioners also spoke of how beloved teachers had introduced them to specific texts that they, the teacher, believed to be sacred. And this established for the student the sacred nature of the text in question.
- Sacredness Established by its Personal Impact: Some interspiritual practitioners spoke of texts being sacred because these texts had had a remarkable impact on them. For example, numerous interspiritual persons surveyed and interviewed for this demonstration project spoke of works by the Tibetan Buddhists His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Chögyam Trungpa Rinpoche, Zen Buddhist Master Thich Nhat Hanh, Roman Catholic monk Fr. Thomas Keating, and the popular writers Wayne Dyer and Eckhart Tolle, as having “transformed” their lives. For them, these books were sacred because for them they held the power of personal transformation.

How Interspiritual Practitioners Interpret Sacred Texts

As stated earlier, interspiritual practitioners face unique challenges when working with sacred texts. Each interspiritual person must decide for him or herself how to interpret sacred texts each with its own history, theology, and truth claims. This is

especially true when sacred texts conflict (for example, in the Christian scriptures Jesus Christ dies on the cross; in the Qur'an he does not).

Moreover, unlike believers in well-established religious traditions, interspiritual persons do not have religious authorities or theological scholars designated within the interspiritual movement itself to guide or assist in the interpretation and use of sacred texts. Each practitioner is bound to no one and no institution, only to his/ her own intellect and conscience.

My research suggests that there is one method of interpretation of sacred texts that is seldom if ever used by interspiritual practitioners and that is the literal form. According to this form of interpretation the sacred text is to be understood according to the "*plain meaning*" expressed by its linguistic construction and historical context. Every interspiritual practitioner surveyed and interviewed for this demonstration project was critical of this interpretative methodology. Nonetheless, aside from the literal method, interspiritual practitioners did use a variety of approaches (often numerous) to interpret and work with sacred scriptures:

- Established Authorities: Many interspiritual practitioners look to existing scholarship within the religious tradition giving birth to the sacred text for assistance in the interpretation. So when dealing with the Vedas they will look to Hindu teachers; on the other hand, if they are working with the Qur'an they will refer to Islamic scholars. While interspiritual practitioners do not necessarily accept uncritically such intra-religious interpretation, they use such interpretation as a guide to understand a religious, theological, and cultural context.
- Historical Critical Method: Some interspiritual practitioners looked to this method to assist in interpreting sacred texts. This method seeks to place the text in question into the historic and cultural context in which the text was written. It asks: what was the political, economic, and religious setting when the work was

written? What were the major political, moral, religious and/or economic issues at the time of its writing? What was the relationship of the writer(s) to these social factors? What was the process by which this text was organized? Who wrote and/or edited the text? In other words, what influenced the writing of the sacred text?

- **Literary Methods:** Interspiritual practitioners also look to the literary methodologies to assist in interpretation. These include understating the type of writing in question (into what genre does it fall into poetry, history, personal letters, mystical/ wisdom writings, etc.); the intention of the writers; the historical and cultural context; the original meaning of words and phrases.
- **Academic Forms of Interpretation:** Some interspiritual practitioners have also looked to Critical Theory, Literary Theory, Feminist Theory, and the growing work around Gay or Queer Theory to assist in the interpretation of sacred texts. Many of these frameworks have been developed in academia and have as their focus the understanding of social, political and economic power, the construction of identity and social structures, and the place of “liberation.”
- **Moral Perspective:** Interspiritual practitioners often look to the moral wisdom inherent in sacred texts. This form of interpretation seems focused on the idea that sacred texts are at the core moral guidebooks that can assist in charting a moral or ethical path through human life.
- **Anagogical Method:** A few of the interspiritual practitioners surveyed and interviewed for this Guidebook claimed to use some form of anagogical interpretation. This type of interpretation is often referred to as mystical interpretation. Like the allegorical or mythological form of interpretation, the anagogic method interprets sacred texts symbolically; however, the symbols are said to speak of future realities.
- **Mythological or Allegorical Method:** The most widely used mode of interpretation among interspiritual practitioners is the Mythological or Allegorical Method. An allegory or myth uses symbolism (symbolic characters, actions, images, places, and/or events) to convey a spiritual, moral, or philosophical idea.

In essence this interpretive methodology holds that sacred texts have a deeper level of meaning than the characters or events explicitly mentioned. This form of interpretation has also been deeply influenced by the work of the psychotherapist Carl Jung and his theory of archetypes. When asked why this interpretive method seemed the most widely accepted in the interspiritual community, numerous practitioners spoke of how the deepest spiritual reality was “ineffable” in character. In other words, beyond simple conceptualization. As a result, one could only speak of these truths through allegory or myth.

The Purpose of Sacred Texts in Interspiritual life

As stated earlier, a sacred text can serve many purposes in the life of a spiritual or religious person or community. A sacred text can be a source of beliefs and practices; it can help be a guide to moral and ethical life; it can help define personal identity and heritage; it can be a source of inspiration; it can act as a connection to sacred history; it can also act as a source of learning about sacred figure(s); and finally, it can be a tool used to dialogue with past and future generations on issues relevant to a person’s faith and beliefs.

All these purposes are relevant to interspiritual practitioners. In short, sacred texts play a host of roles in the interspiritual community. At the core, however, they are a source of inspiration, guidance, and wisdom. As an interspiritual practitioner asserted, “Regardless of the religious tradition, sacred scriptures are written testimony to humanity’s on-going relationship and struggle with Reality.”

THE NUMEROUS PATHS TO INTERSPIRITUAL PRACTICE

*The world is no longer something that can be used merely as a stepping-stone to one's own enlightenment; instead, the transformation of the world itself is given an equal ontological status to one's own. In other words, this new way sees one's spiritual path inextricably linked with the transformation of our global community into a connected, mature, and harmonious whole.*⁸⁵

There are numerous ways a person can choose to practice or live an interspiritual life.⁸⁶ Nonetheless, there are at least two major types of interspiritual practitioners: There

⁸⁵ McEntee, Loc. 290-293.

⁸⁶ It has been asked: Are members of the New Age Movement interspiritual? This question arises because New Age practice seems to align with interspiritual thinking in three very significant ways: (1) New Age practitioners are open to spiritual wisdom regardless of the source. (2) New Age practitioners adopt a myriad of practices that come from the great wisdom and religious traditions. (3) The New Age movement is defined by its interest in the esoteric and mystery elements of religion and spirituality (a fact that is often conflated with an interest in the mystical aspects of faith). See Wouter Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

In his excellent thesis paper on interspirituality and the phenomena of multiple belonging (where a person is said to practice two or more religions at the same time) Rev. Matthew Wright argues that New Age practice is not the same as interspiritual practice. He holds that New Age spirituality, “lacks the greater degree of commitment” required of interspiritual practitioners. Moreover, he also argues that New Age practice constitutes “a complete lack of religious belonging.” In other words, according to Rev. Wright interspirituality entails some form of religious belonging.

I agree with Rev. Wright, New Age spirituality is not interspiritual in the manner we are defining it in this Guidebook, but not because of any lack of commitment or the absence of religious affiliation. I believe New Age spirituality is not interspiritual for two other reasons:

Interspirituality, unlike New Age practice, is focused on entering, experientially, the mystical core of established religions. New Age practice has little connection to established faiths. I am not arguing here that interspirituality requires some form of religious belonging or formal affiliation with an established faith. I believe it is possible for someone to have an interspiritual practice and have no formal or informal relationship with an established religion. What I am arguing is that interspirituality often requires some reference (and formal exploration) of established religions and this is lacking in New Age spirituality.

The New Age movement (defined by interest in channeling, crystals, divination, tarot cards, and various esoteric forms of healing) is focused on magic, while the interspiritual movement is focused on mysticism. And magic has nothing to do with mysticism. Magic is focused on the attainment and use of extraordinary powers to control or affect the natural world. Mysticism is focused on archiving a profound connection with the core of reality or being, not for the purposes of control, but for the purpose of transforming human consciousness. It should be noted: New Age practice has become for many a path to authentic interspiritual

are those who remain loyal to one or more religious traditions (and belong to a worship community). And there are those who are unaffiliated and would not define themselves as believers of any particular path. Within and between these two polarities is a host of ways to live and experience an interspiritual life. The following is a list of the multiple ways an interspiritual practice can be achieved:

- There are those who remain within the normative framework (or belief system) of one faith but explore, borrow, and/or find inspiration from other faiths that do not conflict with their own. For example, there is the Jewish person who also practices Buddhist meditation. Or the Moslem who practices hatha yoga. Within this form of interspiritual practice the individual often does not delve too deeply into the Theology (or belief system) of the other, but will explore and borrow from the texts, rituals, and practices of the adopted faiths.
- There is also the person who claims to belong to two or more traditions, but in fact has one tradition that defines his/her world view. One tradition becomes what Matthew Wright in his thesis paper defines as “the primary interpretive lens.” An example of this is the Christian-Buddhist who interprets nirvana as God-Head, and emptiness as the Holy Spirit. Wright quoting another scholar says of these people that they “belong to the symbolic and historical framework of one religion and the hermeneutical framework of another.”⁸⁷
- There are also interspiritual practitioners who belong to multiple traditions and allow one tradition to be normative in certain areas of belief and practice

exploration and over time interspiritual practice. Moreover, even if New Age practice does not lead to interspirituality, New Age practice has its own unique value to those who follow its norms. In short, I am not attempting here a critique of New Age spirituality, but only a clarification of interspiritual practice.

⁸⁷ It should be noted, Rev. Matthew Wright’s paper focuses on the experience of Multiple Belonging, where people are said to belong to two or more traditions (a phenomena within the interspiritual movement). I consider this one form of interspiritual practice, but certainly not the only one.

while allowing another tradition to be normative in other areas. Rev. Wright defines this as “partial belonging.”

- Some interspiritual practitioners engage in a form of full belonging. These are people who attempt to completely accept the beliefs, rituals, and practices of the multiple faiths to which they belong. They do not attempt to reconcile these faiths, nor does one faith act as the interpretive basis of any other. Each faith is fully adopted on its own terms.⁸⁸ “Each tradition is embraced in its fullness,” writes Rev. Wright.⁸⁹ This form of belonging requires a level of commitment that is profound, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually demanding, and rare. Rev. Wright says of this type of interspiritual practice:

She starts by making a real, heartfelt, unselfish effort—a bold and hazardous one—to understand the belief, the world, the archetypes, the culture, the mythical and conceptual background, the emotional and historical associations of her friends [in the new tradition] from the inside. In short, she seriously attempts an existential incarnation of herself into another world—which obviously involves prayer, initiation, study, and worship. It is not experimentation but a genuine experience undergone within one’s own faith. Such a person does all she can to truly understand the new tradition from the inside out—taking initiation and involving herself in the community, worship, study, and prayer of the second tradition, while also maintaining the similar requirements of her original tradition. As is obvious, this requires hard work, and it is not for everyone.⁹⁰

- Finally, there are interspiritual practitioners who do not belong to any particular faith tradition. Some accept the belief system (or interpretive schema) of a particular faith tradition. Others do not. Nonetheless, there are people who simply enter into the realm of spirituality with a profound

⁸⁸ During the research for this Guidebook the writer discovered that among interspiritual thought leaders there is a sense that this type of interspiritual practice constitutes the most mature form of interspirituality. For it is within this type of *full belonging* that the interspiritual practitioner opens him/herself up to the complete, unadulterated richness, complexity, and mystical depths of a religious tradition.

⁸⁹ Matthew Wright, “Reshaping Religion: Interspirituality and Multiple Religious Belonging” (M.Div. thesis, Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary, 2012), <http://interspirituality.com/729>.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

willingness to explore the deepest truths of the world's religious traditions, while remaining free of any particular religious or intuitional affiliation.

The New Interspiritual Monasticism

One final word on paths to interspiritual practice; in the past few years there has been a growing movement within interspiritual circles to develop a monastic alternative for people committed deeply to interspirituality. The movement has gained some public voice with the recent publication of a book by two young interspiritual leaders, Roy McEntee and Adam Bucko. Their book, published in 2015, is entitled *New Monasticism: An Interspiritual Manifesto for Contemplative Living*. They write in their book:

“The monk is a lay person.... An order of monastics is essentially a lay order. Some monks may live in monasteries, but increasingly the majority will live in their own homes or form small communities— a monastic order in the world.” These words were spoken by the Catholic monk Bede Griffiths toward the end of his life. He went on to express a new vision for monastics, one in which communities and individuals live spiritual lives independent of religious organizations or institutions, independent of celibacy and overarching rules and dogmas— free to follow their own conscience and guidance of the Holy Spirit in living a sacred life, yet united in the common cause of building a sacred world. We envision these “new monastic” lives as being fully engaged in contemporary life, involved in relationships, exploring new ways of walking the spiritual path, and committed to sacred activism.⁹¹

A new form of separation from the world: The new monastics do not set themselves apart from the world physically; these new modern monastics do not live in gender isolated monasteries, convents, or hermitages. No, these new monastics live, work, and practice their faith in the world as do all lay people. Their separation is cultural; they are set apart by their moral vision. The new monastics have a vision for, and a commitment to, the healing and transformation of their lives, and most importantly

⁹¹ McEntee and Bucko, Loc. 239-245.

for the world itself. The New Monastic separates him/herself from the pathological individualism, self-absorption, materialism, consumerism, ethical relativism, competitiveness, and violence that define so much of modern culture. Bucko and McEntee write:

The root of the word monk is *monachos*, which means “set apart.” For us, this is not so much a physical separation as a setting oneself apart from our cultural conditioning— from an unquestioning, and un-questing, view of life, one that drives us to adulate material success, seduces us into participating in the devastation of our planet, hardens our hearts to the plight of the poor and oppressed, and divorces us from our innate capacity for spiritual growth and maturity.⁹²

They argue that a new form of monasticism needs to be developed in the modern world, a monasticism that will be defined by three overarching commitment: (1) to interspirituality; (2) to continued personal and global transformation; (3) to a life of disciplined spiritual practice. In their book they argue that the New Monastic spiritual practice can be grounded in the following:

1. A commitment to interspiritual practice: The new monasticism is committed to exploring and using the wisdom and richness found within the entire corpus that is the human spiritual and religious heritage. It is also open to the advances in the natural and social sciences.
2. A deep and complete commitment to continued personal transformation, spiritual growth, and maturity. This new monasticism, like the traditional form, is committed to spiritual disciplines that lead to a life of increasing love, compassion, wisdom, and self-less service. At the core the new monasticism is committed to a life that seeks to transcend the egoism and self-absorption that defines normal human existence. Bucko and McEntee write, “What does link all

⁹² Ibid., Loc. 275-279.

monastics, however, is a total life commitment to the development and maturation of one's spiritual life.”⁹³

3. Openness to science and scholarship: The new monasticism is open to the contributions and insights found in science as well as the arts. Bucko and McEntee say of this new approach to spiritual life, “While embedded within our wisdom and religious traditions, it is beholden to none, and encompasses modern scientific and psychological truths, sociological and cultural insights, and political and economic realities.”⁹⁴
4. A dedication to the transformation of the world. Unlike some forms of classical monasticism, the new monasticism does not renounce the world but instead lives within it and is committed to its renewal and transformation. “The world is no longer something that can be used merely as a stepping-stone to one's own enlightenment; instead, the transformation of the world itself is given an equal ontological status to one's own. In other words, this new way sees one's spiritual path inextricably linked with the transformation of our global community into a connected, mature, and harmonious whole.”⁹⁵
5. A focus on spiritual practice. One of the defining characteristics of the new monasticism (like its traditional form) is a focus on spiritual practice, structure, and discipline. As stated before, what ultimately defines a monk is his/her total life commitment to the spiritual life for the purpose of personal and collective transformation. In their book, Bucko and McEntee identify a variety of practices that they believe can form the foundation of a modern, in-the-world, monastic life:
 - a. Daily practice: These can include prayer, meditation, yoga, fasting, and a host of other spiritual technologies⁹⁶ whose focus is twofold; (1) lessening

⁹³ Ibid., Loc. 271.

⁹⁴ Ibid., Loc. 264-265.

⁹⁵ Ibid., Loc. 293.

⁹⁶ A phrase coined by Houston Smith the religion scholar and proponent of interspirituality.

the hold of egoism and (2) connecting the human person with the deepest reality. In their book, Bucko and McEntee also stress the importance and power of adopting some form of contemplative practice, because it is, “foundational to spiritual transformation.”

Numerous interspiritual practitioners spoke of the centrality of “contemplation” to their practice and spiritual lives. This of course leads us to the question, “What is contemplation?” In his book, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (which is heavily quoted by Bucko and McEntee in their book), the monk and writer Fr. Thomas Merton reflects on the meaning of contemplation, and concludes that contemplation is:

Life itself, fully awake, fully active, and fully aware that it is alive. It is spiritual wonder. It is spontaneous awe at the sacredness of life, of being. It is gratitude for life, for awareness, and for being. It is a vivid realization of the fact that life and being in us proceed from an invisible, transcendent, and infinitely abundant Source. Contemplation is, above all, awareness of the reality of that Source. It knows the Source, obscurely, inexplicably, but with a certitude that goes beyond reason and beyond simple faith... It is a more profound depth of faith; a knowledge too deep to be grasped in mere images, in words, or even in clear concepts. It can be suggested by words, by symbols, but in the very moment of trying to indicate what it knows the contemplative mind takes back what it has said, and denies what it has affirmed... Contemplation is also the response to a call: a call from Him Who has no voice, and yet Who speaks in everything that is, and Who, most of all, speaks in the depths of our own being; for we ourselves are words of His. But we are words that are meant to respond to Him, to answer to Him, to echo Him, and even in some way to contain Him and signify Him. Contemplation is this echo. It is a deep resonance in the inmost center of our spirit in which our very life loses its separate voice and resounds with the majesty and the mercy of the Hidden and Living One... It is awakening, enlightenment, and the amazing intuitive grasp by which love gains certitude of God’s creative and dynamic intervention in our daily life.⁹⁷

⁹⁷ Thomas Merton, *New Seeds of Contemplation* (Norfolk, CT: New Directions, 1961), 1.

- b. Practices that are scheduled weekly, monthly, and yearly: The idea here to construct a life where spiritual practice is prioritized, where the commitment to personal transformation and spiritual maturity becomes the core around which one's life is molded and lived. To do this one's day, week, month and year must bear the mark of one's commitment to spiritual development. One's schedule should find space for daily, weekly, monthly and annual practices and retreats.
- c. Sacred Activism: Bucko and McEntee quote the writer Andrew Harvey, "Sacred activism is the fusion of the mystic's passion for God with the activist's passion for justice, creating a third fire, which is the burning sacred heart that longs to help, preserve, and nurture every living thing."⁹⁸ According to Bucko and McEntee, the New Monasticism will be defined by men and women willing to serve the transformation for the world. And this commitment will be expressed in work whose ultimate aim is justice, peace, and the advancement of human dignity, and the dignity of all creation.

New Monastics are activists in the deepest sense; they practice their faith, live, and work in the world of the suffering, not merely to commune with the forgotten, but also because through both presence and sacrifice, they work with the marginalized in acts of personal and collective transformation. In essence Sacred Activism is at the heart of the New Monasticism. Brother Wayne Teasdale writes:

Why do I choose to be a monk in the world and not locked away in a remote hermitage? Because I want to identify with and be identified with all those who suffer alone in the world, who are abandoned, homeless, unwanted, unknown, and unloved. I want to know the insecurity and vulnerability they experience, to forge solidarity with them... I wish to be near the least, the forgotten and ignored, so I can be a sign of hope

⁹⁸ McEntee and Bucko, Loc. 495-496.

and love for them and for all others who need me in some way.⁹⁹

- d. Formal Study: The New Monastics, like more traditional monks, will undertake formal study and formation. Bucko and McEntee recommend doing this with a mentor or in some cases within a formal lay order or community. A life defined by one's spiritual vision and values is infused with remarkable power when it is aided by intellectual growth and development. Moreover, when formal study is undertaken with the help, support, and guidance of a teacher and/ or community, this transformative energy is magnified.
- e. Shadow Work: The New Monastics are committed to continued psychological growth and development. Within the context of the New Monasticism spiritual practice is not confused (or used in the absence) of rigorous psychological work. Psychological work leads the new monastic to explore and confront the most challenging parts of his/her psyche. Bucko and McEntee write, "Without shadow work many practitioners become victims of what John Wellwood calls 'spiritual bypass,' where we use spiritual ideas and practices to avoid facing unresolved emotional issues, psychological wounds, and unfinished developmental tasks."¹⁰⁰
- f. Spiritual Direction: In their book Bucko and McEntee recommend spiritual direction as a foundational practice to a modern monastic life. Within this practice one works with someone willing to act as soul partner, companion, and guide. Bucko and McEntee write that one should always keep in mind the words of Father Thomas Keating: "The best direction aims at enabling or empowering the directee to graduate to the more refined and delicate guidance of the Spirit in all matters. The director becomes a fellow traveler and friend on the journey, and the directee and

⁹⁹ Teasdale, *Monk in the World*, Kindle Edition: Location 373.

¹⁰⁰ McEntee and Bucko, Loc. 522-524.

director speak the truth to each other in love. Speaking just the truth can be too harsh. Speaking the truth in love is mutually sustaining.”¹⁰¹

- g. **Spiritual Friendship and Community:** Within the New Monastic path people make room for relationships that enrich and deepen life. There is an old saying that proclaims, “All of life is lived in relationships.” Within the New Monasticism, much like the traditional form of monastic life, relationships provide the love, compassion, support, guidance, and challenge that allow the spiritual life to be fully cultivated, lived, and celebrated. Often friends see what we do not, and true spiritual friends speak the truth that is usually not heard anywhere else. Spiritual friendship and community provide the safe container where spirit is met, life is clearly seen, truth is discovered, and growth and evolution are welcomed, and finally transformation occurs.
- h. **The Community of Vows:** Bucko and McEntee recommend the adoption of vows. Vows represent a formal naming of a person’s deepest commitments. They can act as tools that deepen and guide one’s spiritual life. In their book Bucko and McEntee use Brother Wayne Teasdale’s *Nine Elements of a Universal Spirituality*¹⁰² to fashion a set of vows for a New Monastic Life:

I vow to actualize and live according to my full moral and ethical capacity. I vow to live in solidarity with the cosmos and all living beings. I vow to live in deep nonviolence. I vow to live in humility and to remember the many teachers and guides who assisted me on my spiritual path. I vow to embrace a daily spiritual practice. I vow to cultivate mature self-knowledge. I vow to live a life of simplicity. I vow to live a life of selfless service and compassionate action. I vow to be a prophetic voice as I work for justice, compassion, and world transformation.¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Ibid., Loc. 537-540.

¹⁰² The Nine Elements were not listed by Teasdale but used as subtitles (with additional comments) in *The Mystic Heart* (1999).

¹⁰³ McEntee and Bucko, Loc. 572-578.

SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

*Spiritual practice is to the mystical life what food and water is to the body.*¹⁰⁴

Spiritual practice connects us to the life-blood of the spiritual life.¹⁰⁵ It is through spiritual practice that the individual person enters into communion with the source that is the objective of the entire spiritual life. And it is spiritual practice that often also connects us to the struggles and challenges of daily human living (to the reality of what it is to be a human person). Br. Teasdale writes, “It is really only through an intense life of spiritual practice that we become aware of our human condition.”¹⁰⁶ Finally, by connecting us to our own deeply human truth and then to reality itself, spiritual practice helps generate the transformation of consciousness that is the goal of interspiritual life. Again Br. Wayne Teasdale writes:

Without a spiritual practice of some kind, spirituality is a hollow affair; it has no substance and is reduced to the formalism of external religiosity. Daily spiritual practice is the “technology” of inner change. Without it, such change is inconceivable...Spiritual practice shapes our understanding, character, will, personality, attitudes, and actions by enlarging their scope through the light of compassion and love.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Teasdale, 141.

¹⁰⁵ For this chapter in our *Guidebook* we relied on two useful books on spiritual practice: Scott W. Alexander, *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 1999); as well as Adele Ahlberg Calhoun, *Spiritual Disciplines Handbook: Practices That Transform Us* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2009).

¹⁰⁶ Teasdale, 106.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 128.

Within the interspiritual community there is a profound and joyful openness to all the various spiritual practices found within the world's various religious and spiritual traditions. The decision to highlight the spiritual practices found in this Guidebook is based on the fact that these practices were mentioned either in a comprehensive survey undertaken by *One Spirit Interfaith Seminary* of interspiritual/ interfaith ministers and/or in the interviews or surveys of interspiritual practitioners conducted by the writer of this Guidebook.¹⁰⁸

One final word before we proceed to briefly explore the various spiritual practices that interspiritual practitioners have found helpful to their growth, evolution, and transformation. We need to ask ourselves, what makes a spiritual practice different from other habits of daily living?

In his excellent book *Everyday Spiritual Practice: Simple Pathways for Enriching Your Life*, the spiritual writer Scott Alexander speaks to three elements that distinguish spiritual practice from other life activities. He writes, "What makes an everyday spiritual practice different from a casual spiritual hobby, something worthwhile that one simply dabbles in when one feels like it?" The answer is intentionality, regularity, and depth."¹⁰⁹ Let's look at each of these:

- Intentionality: Spiritual practice must be enlivened and empowered by right intention. The Buddha has "Right Intention" as the second virtue of his great *Eight Fold Path* that he believed lead to Enlightenment. The Buddha understood that intention is the power of consciousness. Intention provides both (1) the

¹⁰⁸ This survey was conducted by Gordon Brode at *One Spirit Interfaith Seminary* in August 2014. It was a survey of One Spirit graduates -- estimated at 850 -- and it obtained responses from 420 of these former students.

¹⁰⁹ Alexander, *Everyday Spiritual Practice*, Loc. 136-138.

purpose behind one's action and (2) the focus of mind and heart to undertake this action. It is the life-energy generating and sustaining spiritual practice.

- Regularity: Spiritual practice is to consciousness what exercise is to the body. By making spiritual practice a daily, weekly, monthly and annual part of one's life one is committing the time and energy necessary for real, continuous, and sustained growth and transformation.
- Depth: "All spiritual practice is about inner transformation," writes Br. Wayne Teasdale.¹¹⁰ Spiritual practice must be able to take us, over time, to the deepest parts of our life and the human struggle. Spiritual practice must be or become a road to enter into realms of being we would not otherwise travel. It must be able to lead to truths we would not otherwise discover. In short, spiritual practice must become a path to the deepest truth and the most difficult yet necessary transformation.
- To these three excellent elements I would add a fourth, Courage. Spiritual Practice is different from other activities in our life because at their highest, at their best, they are courageous acts. We perform these activities with a willingness to confront truth in ourselves, in each other, and in life itself. And we do this with the courage that it will lead to growth, healing, change, and evolution. To do this one must overcome fear, one must be bold, and one must possess the courage to transform.

There are a host of practices (the great religious scholar Houston Smith usually refers to them as "technologies") that have been created throughout the ages by religious and spiritual leaders. These have been categorized in numerous ways. For our purposes we have used four simple categories:

1. The Interior Path: These are spiritual practices that lead the practitioner within (prayer, meditation, and journaling to name a few). These practices lead to what

¹¹⁰ Teasdale, 146.

one spiritual practitioner called “the temple of the mind and the altar of the heart.” These practices often remind us that the most personally intimate truths often are what connects us to what is most universally human.

2. The Path of Learning: These are practices that use knowledge and the intellect as paths to the ultimate nature of reality (examples are *lectio divina*, sacred reading, and studying). In the Hindu faith this is path known as Jnana Yoga. Writes Houston Smith:

Jnana yoga, intended for spiritual aspirants who have a strong reflective bent, is the path to oneness with the Godhead through knowledge. Such knowledge— the Greeks’ *gnosis* and *sophia*— has nothing to do with factual information; it is not encyclopedic. It is, rather, an intuitive discernment that transforms, turning the knower eventually into that which she knows.¹¹¹

3. The Body as Path: These are practices that use the human body (such as yoga, breath work, or dance) and creation (nature walks for example) as a path to transformation. The person through these practices encounters awareness, inspiration, and an inner knowing through an encounter with the reality of ones one psychically or the psychically of the natural world.
4. The Path of Action: In the Hindu faith this path would be referred to as Karma Yoga. Through the Path of Action (which includes such practices as forgiveness and sacred service) spiritual practitioners enter into activities usually requiring an encounter with another person (“the other”). According to the Hindu faith, when this encounter is defined by self-less, unconditional love the results can be profoundly transformative to the individual practitioner and at times even to the other. Many interspiritual practitioners suggested that all spiritual maturity expresses itself in some form of activity that can be defined as a Path of Action.

¹¹¹ Houston Smith, *The World’s Religions* (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), Kindle Edition: Location 732-735.

The Interior Path

Chanting: Chanting is essentially a form of singing. Often it involves the repetition of a word or phrase. People have reported entering profound states of consciousness during the practice of chanting. One interspiritual practitioner spoke of the power of chant to “take me to divine places I can’t go any other way.” Nearly every religious tradition has developed some form of chant to enrich their worship.

Divination: Divination is in many ways an old and subtle art. Those who practice divination often seek one of three things: (1) to gain insight into a question or situation and/or (2) to foresee or foretell future events and/or (3) discover hidden wisdom or knowledge. And these purposes are usually achieved by:

- The reading of signs or symbols (such as tarot cards or sea shells);
- The interpretation of omens;
- By the aid of supernatural powers (such as the ability to speak to *spirits*).

Journaling: At its core journaling is the simple discipline of writing down one's thoughts and feelings. Journaling is a way of honoring one's life by providing some time every day to reflect on that day, all its activities, and one's inner life. It is a way to open one's self to a deeper knowing, a more profound seeing, and a more subtle wisdom.

Meditation: There are so many forms of meditation and for each form there are numerous purposes. At its simplest level meditation is a way to teach the mind to rest in the here and now. It is a way to be “mindful” of the present moment. At its heart, meditation is undertaken by many interspiritual practitioners for the purpose of reaching a heightened level of spiritual awareness. Writes Ken Wilber:

Indeed, the whole point of meditation or contemplation—whether it appears in the East or in the West, whether Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, or Hindu—is to free ourselves from the “optical delusion” that we are

merely separate egos set apart from each other and from eternal Spirit, and to discover instead that, once released from the prison of individuality, we are one with Godhead and thus one with all manifestation, in a perfectly timeless and eternal fashion.¹¹²

Music (and the Arts): Some interspiritual practitioners found playing an instrument or simply listening to music to be a powerful spiritual practice and a way to achieve deep spiritual states. In nearly every religious tradition and culture, music and all the arts have played a major spiritual role. An interspiritual teacher wrote, “The artist finds spiritual inspiration, beauty, as well as personal expression through painting, drawing, sculpture, music, dance or poetry.”¹¹³

Prayer: Prayer is often a way of achieving communion with divinity. Prayers are said to give thanks or express gratitude, to worship or praise, to ask for help. One interspiritual practitioner said that prayer was “a way to remain in constant connection with the source of life and truth. It is a way to open myself to God’s grace and power.” In some Buddhist circles prayers are a way of setting intention and hence directing (and molding) the mind.

Shamanic Journey: It is difficult to speak of Shamanic Journeying without first defining what a shaman is. According to Houston Smith, Shamans are men and women who are essentially spiritual prodigies. Shamans are people born with unique talents and abilities. He writes:

The shaman...can bypass symbolism and perceive spiritual realities directly. We can think of shamans as spiritual savants, savant being defined as a person whose talents, be they in music (Mozart), drama (Shakespeare), mathematics, or whatever domain, are exceptional to the point of belonging to a different order of magnitude. Subject to severe

¹¹² Wilber, *Grace and Grit*, 20.

¹¹³ Edward Bastian, *Mandala: Creating an Authentic Spiritual Path: An InterSpiritual Process* (Boulder, CO: Albion-Andalus Books, 2015), Kindle Edition: 9.

physical and emotional traumas in their early years, shamans are able to heal themselves and reintegrate their lives in ways that place psychic if not cosmic powers at their disposal. These powers enable them to engage with spirits, both good and evil, drawing power from the former and battling the latter where need be. They are heavily engaged in healing, and appear to have preternatural powers to foretell the future and discern lost objects.¹¹⁴

The idea of the shamanic journey is to induce a trancelike state (an altered state of consciousness) common among shamans. This journey is undertaken for two specific purposes: (1) to heal personal wounds or to achieve personal growth or spiritual insight, and/or (2) to obtain information or power with which to aid a troubled person or community.

Silence: Silence is the cultivation of quiet and calm in one's life. While some will say that this is done in order to "more clearly hear the voice of God," others have come to the conclusion that silence has its own unique character and purpose. Silence is in itself valuable as a teacher and healer. Scott Alexander writes:

Moreover, as contemporary Swiss philosopher Max Picard notes in his book *The World of Silence*, silence is not just the absence of sound. Rather, it is, Picard suggests, "a primary, objective reality, which cannot be traced back to anything else. It cannot be replaced by anything else; it cannot be exchanged for anything else." Silence just is. And as obvious, ever-present, and unobtrusive as it is, it is also an elemental, multifaceted, and deeply spiritual reality. It preceded the big bang and will remain long after the last quark disintegrates. Thus, not only because of the practical aspects of helping us to reestablish our priorities but also because of its deep, elemental, spiritual aspects, silence is eminently worthy of our attention.¹¹⁵

Visioning: This practice has been used by various religious traditions, but I would say that Tibetan Buddhists have raised it from an art into a science. Mandalas as well as iconography are tools used to aid in certain forms of visioning. In visioning a person

¹¹⁴ Smith, *The World's Religions*, Loc. 7983-7988.

¹¹⁵ Alexander, Loc. 599-605.

consciously and meticulously creates in their mind a personage (say a divinity), a thing, or event. While there are many purposes and methods used for visioning, one of the major purposes is to acquire through the vision the character or traits of the thing in question. For example, many Tibetan Buddhists will vision the Buddha of Compassion with the hopes that doing so will engender a more compassionate heart.

The Path of Learning

Lectio Divina: This is a traditional Benedictine practice of scriptural reading, meditation and prayer intended to promote communion with the Divine and to increase the knowledge of God's Word. Father Thomas Keating has been one of the most popular modern teachers of this old and profound practice.

Sacred Reading: Sacred reading normally involves choosing a book (often chosen for its spiritual value) and simply reading through it with the intention of achieving insight or inspiration. Nearly every interspiritual practitioner who practiced sacred reading also included moments of prayer and meditation. Some practitioners did sacred reading as part of a group and felt that the group discussion and collective wisdom added to the power of the practice.

Study: Studying as a path for spiritual growth and transformation involves more than the acquisition of knowledge. All forms of studying bring you into connection with others, their ideas, their lives and struggles, their perspectives. At the heart of this practice is dialogue. This dialogue takes place through reading, writing, and/or conversation. At its heart, studying involves the ability to engage with another. Studying involves the willingness to enter another's mind and to allow access to your own. Studying is an intimate form of connection. It is a way of allowing yourself, through the power of intellect, to be transfixed, transported...ultimately transformed.

The Body as a Path

Breath work: This work involves conscious, controlled breathing. It is often done with the guidance of an expert (many of whom are trained yoga instructors) and it is done for relaxation, meditation, or therapeutic purposes.

Dancing: Numerous interspiritual practitioners spoke of dance (and music) as practices that lead to a deep connection to the body, when done with a partner, a connection with others. Many practitioners experienced in dance a loss of self-consciousness. And finally, many reported a sublime experience of joy, even bliss. As one practitioner put it, “Dance always reminds me that life was made for us to enjoy!”

Exercise: For some interspiritual practitioners normal physical exercise became a spiritual practice. While normally done to sustain or improve health and fitness, physical exercise can also be a time to focus the mind on the here and now (a form of mindfulness) and let go of the daily preoccupations.

Fasting: In its simplest form fasting means abstaining from food (and often, drink as well). One practitioner referred to fasting as a form of poverty. For her it was a way to remember that not all people have the luxury of three meals a day. By fasting she was connecting to the suffering experienced by others. For some practitioners of this spiritual path, it is a way to remind oneself that the body must be put in service of the spirit. Finally, there are people for whom fasting is a sacrifice, a kind of gift done for and in honor of God, and like all sacrifices it is a transformation of energy; the desire for food is used in service for the desire for God.

Martial Arts: The martial arts are a collection of exercises that mix the physical arts of combat and self-defense (such as karate and judo) along with a philosophy deeply grounded in Daoism and certain forms of Buddhism. Like in yoga, for many deeply

spiritual practitioners the martial arts are a way to balance mind and body, and ultimately realize union with the deepest truth.

Nature as a Path: Many interspiritual practitioners spoke of connection with nature as a means of initiating a deep and transformative experience. Many felt that nature walks and nature retreats allowed them a connection with reality that was profound and over time transforming. One interspiritual practitioner interviewed for this Guidebook spoke of nature as his only true guru (teacher).

Yoga: Yoga is a Hindu practice and philosophy. There are many forms of yoga; here we are focusing on hatha yoga which includes *asanas* (the physical postures), breathing, and meditation. This ancient Indian teaching is focused on bringing balance and unity between the mind, body, and soul, and ultimately unity between the person and Ultimate Reality (or God). Ken Wilber writes:

In Hinduism it is said that there are five major paths or yogas. “Yoga” simply means “union,” a way to unite the soul with Godhead. In English the word is “yoke.” When Christ says, “My yoke is easy,” he means “My yoga is easy.” We see the same root in the Hittite yugan, the Latin jugum, the Greek zugon, and so on.¹¹⁶

The Path of Action

Forgiveness: The Path of Forgiveness is a path of letting go (and for many it is also a path to deep personal healing). We forgive when we let go of the resentments we hold against an offender. It is at the deepest level, a gift we give to ourselves and then a gift we give to the world. When we forgive we let go of the toxic feelings that often infect and disrupt our lives. In his brilliant book on forgiveness, Bishop Desmond Tutu writes:

¹¹⁶ Wilber, *Grace and Grit*, 86.

Forgiveness is not easy— it requires hard work and a consistent willingness. • Forgiveness is not weakness— it requires courage and strength. • Forgiveness does not subvert justice— it creates space for justice to be enacted with a purity of purpose that does not include revenge. • Forgiveness is not forgetting— it requires a fearless remembering of hurt. • Forgiveness is not quick— it can take several journeys through the cycles of remembering and grief before one can truly forgive and be free.¹¹⁷

In his book Bishop Tutu outlines four stages to this path which he believes can be a way to heal both ourselves and the world:

1. One must be able to tell one's story.
2. One must be able to clearly name the hurt.
3. One then must decide to grant forgiveness.
4. Finally one must decide to renew or release the relationship.

Sacred Service: This path requires that we undertake work in service of another person or the earth. Many spiritual teachers assert that this work is to be done from a place of selflessness and without desire of any personal gain. Writing in his book, *How Can I Help?* Ram Dass says of sacred service:

So we face an interesting situation. Our impulses to care for one another often seem instinctive. The more we're able to act on them freely, the more opportunity we have to feel whole and be helpful... The reward, the real grace, of conscious service, then, is the opportunity not only to help relieve suffering but to grow in wisdom, experience greater unity, and have a good time while we're doing it.¹¹⁸

Twelve Steps: A friend of mine who has been in recovery from alcohol and drugs once referred to Alcoholics Anonymous (the first 12 Step Program to ever exist) as *Spirituality 101*. To him the twelve steps represented the most basic form of spiritual

¹¹⁷ Desmond Tutu and Mpho Tutu, *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World* (New York: HarperCollins, 2014), Kindle Edition: 40.

¹¹⁸ Ram Dass, Paul Gorman, *How Can I Help?* (Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011), Kindle Edition: 11, 16.

practice and a powerful way to spiritual and personal maturity. Each step is to be undertaken, nearly always with the support of a sponsor. The Twelve Steps are as follows:

1. We admitted we were powerless over alcohol—that our lives had become unmanageable.
2. Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.
3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.
4. Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.
5. Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.
6. Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.
7. Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.
8. Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.
9. Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.
10. Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.
11. Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God, as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.
12. Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ AA World Services, *The Twelve Steps: Alcoholics Anonymous* (New York: Alcoholics Anonymous World Services, 1981).

THE GOAL OF INTERSPIRITUAL LIFE

“This is my simple religion. No need for temples. No need for complicated philosophy. Your own mind, your own heart is the temple. Your philosophy is simple kindness.” —Dalai Lama XIV

During the course of putting together this Guidebook the writer spoke to numerous interspiritual practitioners and thought leaders. These conversations began with an exploration of ways to define interspirituality. We discovered that the heart of interspirituality is the willingness (even commitment) to enter the spiritual core of the world’s enduring faith and religious traditions through their mystical insights and practices. And like advocates of the Perennial Philosophy, interspiritual practitioners believe that the mystical core of the world’s great religions and spiritualities speak of one enduring reality or truth. However, interspiritual practitioners do not engage in this exploration out of an intellectual interest, nor even with a philosophical or theological aim in mind, they do so with the goal of transforming human consciousness.

Hence, the focus on mysticism, as we saw in our chapter entitled “Mysticism and Interspirituality,” mysticism and mystical practice can lead to a transformative union with Reality such that consciousness paradoxically manifests both a new freedom and a new sense of connection to creation.

How does one give birth to this new freedom and a new sense of connection to the world? The only way to give birth to this new way of life is by experiencing the death of

an old one; and this happens when, through spiritual practice, the individual person moves away from a life defined by ego identification. Br. Wayne Teasdale says it best:

Spiritual practice is how the mystic approaches the inner self and relates to others, the world, nature, and the cosmos. Spiritual practice is the cutting edge of radical interior change and the basis (along with grace, in the theistic schools of spirituality) for profound self-knowledge to emerge in our lives.¹²⁰

Ego defined consciousness suggests that the person is separate and apart from creation (from nature) and nothing more than the sum total of his/her thoughts and feelings. Nature and creation, on the other hand, is seen as chaotic, random, without grace or mercy. This solitary and isolating identification places the individual at the center – and in opposition – to a world that is threatening and dangerous; the person lives a life that is fear-driven, anxious, and lonely.

To ward off the fear, manage the risks imagined by anxiety, and decrease the loneliness and isolation, the individual seeks the safety of the tribe (be it racial, religious, or national). Tribal life and identification, with its “us against them” mentality, becomes a way of life. As a result, the ego-driven world is a world requiring clear ethnic, religious, national, and racial boundaries. This is the world where you must be clear about your allegiances, lest you become a threat to the group, the community, the nation, the tribe. Any transgression by one member is a threat to all members. This world demands clearly defined social norms, clearly defined communal boundaries, clearly defined national, racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities.

An ego defined consciousness reduces life to a continuous struggle for survival, power becomes an obsession, fight or flight becomes the personal norm, competition the

¹²⁰ Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart*, 126.

social rule, war a global constant. And this separation, isolation, and self-absorption is the heart of evil and suffering; many interspiritual practitioners believe that this insight is found in many of the world's great religions. Ken Wilber writes: "It's true that the equation of Hell or samsara with the separate self is strongly emphasized in the East, particularly in Hinduism and Buddhism. But you find an essentially similar theme in the writings of the Catholic, Gnostic, Quaker, Kabbalistic and Islamic mystics."¹²¹

The goal of interspirituality is to birth a new consciousness, one that naturally leads to identification with all humanity and to creation itself. Br. Wayne Teasdale wrote:

This labor of transformation is the work of the contemplative in all of us, and generously accepting that work permits us to cultivate our own mystic character. The mystic character grows out of humility of heart and simplicity of spirit, a radical openness to the real. The mystic heart is able to abandon the false self, the egoic life of the deluded self.¹²²

This transformative connection is what is meant by spiritual maturity! At the heart of the interspiritual movement is the belief that the mystic path, the path walked by many of the forebears of the world's enduring religious traditions, leads one naturally to this new consciousness. Again, Ken Wilber:

In your own being, the small self must die so that the big Self may resurrect. This death and new birth is described in several different terms by the traditions. In Christianity, of course, it finds its prototype in the figures of Adam and Jesus—Adam, whom the mystics call the "Old Man" or "Outer Man," is said to have opened the gates of Hell, while Jesus Christ, the "New Man" or "Inner Man," opens the gates of Paradise. Specifically, Jesus' own death and resurrection, according to the mystics, is the archetype of the death of the separate self and the resurrection of a new and eternal destiny from the stream of consciousness, namely, the divine or Christic Self and its Ascension. As St. Augustine said, "God became man so that man may become God." This process of turning from "manhood" to "Godhood," or from the outer person to the inner person, or

¹²¹ Wilber, *Grace and Grit*, 85.

¹²² Teasdale, *Mystic Heart*, 243.

from the self to the Self, is known in Christianity as *metanoia*, which means both “repentance” and “transformation”—we repent of the self (or sin) and transform as the Self (or Christ), so that, as you said, “not I but Christ liveth in me.” Similarly, Islam views this death-and resurrection as both *tawbah*, which means “repentance,” and *galb*, which means “transformation,” both of which are summarized in al-Bistami’s succinct phrase, “Forgetfulness of self is remembrance of God.” In both Hinduism and Buddhism, this death-and-resurrection is always described as the death of the individual soul (*jivatman*) and the reawakening of one’s true nature, which metaphorically the Hindus describe as All Being (*Brahman*) and the Buddhists as Pure Openness (*shunyata*). The actual moment of rebirth or breakthrough is known as enlightenment or liberation (*moksha* or *bodhi*). The Lankavatara Sutra describes this enlightenment experience as a “complete turning about in the deepest seat of consciousness.” This “turning about” is simply the undoing of the habitual tendency to create a separate and substantial self where there is in fact only vast, open, clear awareness. This turning about or *metanoia*, Zen calls *satori* or *kensho*. “Ken” means true nature and “sho” means “directly seeing.” Directly seeing one’s true nature is becoming Buddha. As Meister Eckhart put it, “In this breaking through I find that God and I are both the same.”¹²³

Interspiritual practitioners believe that the mystic path, as revealed in nearly all the great enduring religious and spiritual traditions, can lead to an encounter with the ultimate nature of reality such that consciousness is transformed. The small, self-centered ego is overcome and in its place is left a sense of the infinite One-ness that is the core of all being. Br. Wayne Teasdale writes, “In the end, the mystical journey is more about what we release than what we acquire on the way.”¹²⁴ How then is the ego overcome?

There are essentially two ways, writes Ken Wilber:

I could simplify the whole thing by saying that all these paths, whether found in Hinduism or in any of the other wisdom traditions, break down into just two major paths. I have another quote here for you...from Swami Ramdas: “There are two ways: one is to expand your ego to infinity, and the other is to reduce it to nothing, the former by knowledge, and the latter by devotion. The Jnani [knowledge holder] says: ‘I am God—the

¹²³ Wilber, *Grace and Grit*, 86-87.

¹²⁴ Teasdale, *Mystic Heart*, 133.

Universal Truth.’ The devotee says: ‘I am nothing, O God, You are everything.’ In both cases, the ego-sense disappears.¹²⁵

And how does this transformation of consciousness take place, how do we “expand our ego to infinity” or “reduce it to nothingness”? Through disciplined, committed, daily, *Spiritual Practice*. “Spiritual practice,” wrote Br. Wayne Teasdale “acts as a catalyst to inner change and growth.”¹²⁶ Interspiritual people are practitioners; they commit to a life of spiritual transformation through spiritual practice. As the leadership of One Spirit state on their website:

No life of genuine spiritual depth and maturity is possible without spiritual practice. Spiritual practice is the means of inner change and transformation, the vehicle for liberation from the false self, from the egocentric structures of consciousness that limit us and generate needless suffering. The purpose of spiritual practice is to wake us up, to realign us daily with what is deepest, truest, and most alive in ourselves and in life.¹²⁷

Within interspiritual circles it is understood that this transformation of consciousness spoken of by the great mystics can only be achieved through spiritual practice, and often under the guidance of a teacher or spiritual community. One again Ken Wilber:

The mystical experience is indeed ineffable, or not capable of being entirely put into words. Like any experience—a sunset, eating a piece of cake, listening to Bach—one has to have the actual experience to see what it’s like. But we don’t therefore conclude that sunset, cake, and music don’t exist or aren’t valid. Further, even though the mystical experience is largely ineffable, it can be communicated or transmitted. Namely, by taking up *spiritual practice* [my emphasis] under the guidance of a spiritual master or teacher, just like, for example, judo can be taught but not spoken.¹²⁸

¹²⁵ Wilber, *Grace and Grit*, 86-87.

¹²⁶ Teasdale, *Mystic Heart*, 10.

¹²⁷ One Spirit Interfaith Seminary, “The Purpose of Spiritual Practice,” <http://onespiritinterfaith.org/sacred-practice/purpose> (accessed February 22, 2016).

¹²⁸ Wilber, *Grace and Grit*, 81-82.

The question then is this, how does one live a life defined by this larger vision? Another way to ask this question is what does spiritual maturity look like? To answer this question we turn again to Br. Wayne Teasdale, one of the founders of the interspiritual movement, and his Nine Elements of a Universal Spirituality. These nine elements provided the structure of his first book on interspirituality, *The Mystic Heart*. Each element not only represents an aspiration of authentic spirituality but also a description of the goal and fruits of genuine spiritual maturity. Each element defines a realm of spiritual and ethical inquiry and responsibility. Interspiritual practitioners also believe that these nine elements also contain vital aspects critical to spiritual education:

- Actualizing full moral and ethical capacity
- Living in harmony with the cosmos and all living beings
- Cultivating a life of deep nonviolence
- Living in humility and gratitude
- Embracing a regular spiritual practice
- Cultivating mature self-knowledge
- Living a life of simplicity
- Being of selfless service and compassionate action¹²⁹
- Empowering the prophetic voice for justice, compassion, and world transformation¹³⁰

¹²⁹ Teasdale, *Mystic Heart*, 105.

¹³⁰ Johnson and Ord, Loc. 7215-7233.

It should be noted, the balancing of individual maturity and collective evolution is central to interspirituality, and it is also a principle in Integral Theory. When Brother Teasdale imagined the work of interspirituality, he set it out along those two lines. There is no spiritual maturity without a deep and demonstrated sense of connection and responsibility for others and for creation. And there is no collective evolution that does not impact the capacity of each individual person to live a life of personal connection, wholeness, integrity, meaning, and purpose. In the words of the spiritual teacher and writer Andrew Harvey, “A spirituality that is only private and self-absorbed, one devoid of an authentic political and social consciousness, does little to halt the suicidal juggernaut of history. On the other hand, an activism that is not purified by profound spiritual and psychological self-awareness . . . will only perpetuate the problem it is trying to solve, however righteous its intentions.”

In the writing of this Guidebook, the writer’s discussions with interspiritual practitioners lead to the development of a short list of “spiritual gifts” that many thought were the product of spiritual maturity. These were many of the traits interspiritual practitioners seemed to believe were the product of a transformed consciousness defined by compassion, wisdom, and self-less service:

- Acceptance: the ability to embrace life as it presents itself.
- Connection: a deep existential sense of life-necessary relationship with others and the world.
- Focus: the ability to minimize or eliminate distractions and concentrate the mind in one direction, a form of self-control.
- Joy: a sense of satisfaction with life as it is in the present moment.

- Letting Go: the ability to transcend and/or heal psychological wounds.
- Meaning: a sense that life has depth, significance, importance, value.
- Originality: the ability to live beyond established psychological and social boundaries.
- Peace: the ability to transcend fear and anxiety and achieve higher levels of equanimity.
- Presence: The ability to be here and now.
- Purpose: an ability to find or create goals and objectives in life.¹³¹

Maybe the question, what is the goal of interspirituality, was most artfully answered by one of the young interspiritual practitioners interviewed for this Guidebook. Let me paraphrase her: The goal of interspirituality is help a person realize their connection with all creation from a place of self-less and unconditional love.

¹³¹ This list is the result of our interviews and surveys with interspiritual practitioners and thought leaders.

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PART II
THE PROJECT

THE BACKGROUND

Like so many of my generation, I am a member of numerous communities to which I belong and from which I feel alienated; communities where I feel at home and where I feel a stranger. My identity, my sense of self, is a cauldron of contradiction, a patchwork of distinct identities and affiliations. I am a man and I am Gay. I am Latino and I am American. I am of European, African, indigenous and Afro-Caribbean ancestry. I am fair skinned and I am a man of color. Born into poverty, and raised in an American ghetto (the South Bronx), today I am middle-class and live in an upscale Manhattan neighborhood. Once I was only expected to be an American, I am now also expected to be a global citizen. I am Christian and I am Buddhist. I am an administrator of scientific research at a major American university, which is to say that I am a man of scholarship, thought, and reason. Nonetheless, I am also a man who believes in the potentially transformative power of the spiritual journey and the value of religious community. Like many modern men and women, my sense of self is grounded in multiplicity, plurality, a variety of participation, even contradiction.

In this modern world identity is often born of accepting and transgressing communal and social boundaries. In short, one belongs to many communities, and also feels oneself an outsider in nearly all. More and more we are giving birth to generations of people whose sense of community and identity, whose very sense of self, is a source of challenge. A growing number of us are holders of multiple, at times, competing identities.

Migration, urbanization, globalization, technology, and the emergence of cyber-communities, have caused a tear in the fabric of social cohesion; the sense of belonging, the sense of community, the construction of identity, and the sense of self are all in flux. As a result, in the modern world the sense of community and identity is often accompanied by a growing sense of confusion, anxiety, alienation, and even isolation.

In the realm of faith, spirituality, and religion the phenomenon of multiple and competing identities is growing seemingly exponentially. Christians now practice Buddhist meditation; Buddhists engage in Jewish prayer; Jews explore Hindu chat; Sufis practice yoga; Catholic priests quote Sikh gurus. There is even a growing community of people who define themselves as “spiritual but not religious.” And studies show that many of these people engage in a myriad of spiritual practices usually from a multiplicity of faith traditions.

Today the theologies, rituals, sacred texts, teachers, and practitioners of various faith traditions are mixing, mingling, colliding. In the same manner that race, color, gender, ethnicity, social/economic strata, nationality, sexual orientation and gender expression, have all become increasingly complex and fluid, religious and spiritual identity is also undergoing transformation. In this intimate personal realm, the realm of religion and spirituality, old boundaries are porous. Through multiple social processes (urbanization, globalization, intermarriage, religious migration, and the phenomena of “spirituality without religion” to name a few) we now find people who claim a host of identities, such as bi-ritual, interfaith, and spiritual migrants.

In each of these phenomena one finds people transgressing traditional religious boundaries and creating new spiritual-identities. They do so out of an existential

imperative, a sense that some part of them will never be whole if all they do is accept (or try to live up to) the inherited norm. They experience a profound imperative – if you will, they experience a call – to move into uncharted territory of spiritual consciousness.

In other words, at some point in their lives these people experience a sense that old identities are creating profound and painful dissonance; they experience a lack of personal wholeness or integrity. Where in the past integrity laid with accepting the inherited social boundaries, today integrity for a growing number of people lies in enlarging those boundaries or destroying them altogether.

In the realm of spirituality and religion this experience – the experience of moving beyond the bounded, clearly defined world of one’s own spiritual community and religion – there is an evolving movement that hopes to birth wholeness out of confusion; a movement that turns social transgression and multiplicity of identity into sources of strength. This movement has a name: Interspirituality.

Interspirituality holds that the world’s enduring religious traditions all spring from mystical experiences or insights of a shared Reality. And what is meant by Realty? Michael V. Anthony in his article, “Can We Acquire Knowledge of Ultimate Reality,” writes:

The meaning of the word ‘reality’ is closely linked to that of ‘appearance’. We typically speak of something *really* being some way in contrast to how it is apparently, or of reality when there is an appearance to “get behind” (e.g., the reality of a heliocentric solar system behind the appearance of the heavenly bodies rotating about the Earth). Since realities behind appearances can themselves be appearances relative to still deeper realities, ultimate reality...is the *reality that is not an appearance relative to any deeper reality* (my emphasis).¹³²

¹³² Jeanine Diller and Asa Kasher, eds., *Models of God and Alternative Ultimate Realities* (New York: Springer, 2013), Kindle Edition: 64.

Another way to potentially define reality that I believe is consistent with this definition is that reality is the grounding out of which phenomena and hence experience arises. In Buddhism this reality is itself nothingness (or emptiness). In other words, ultimate reality is ineffable and hence indefinable. At best we can only allude to ultimate reality with mythopoetic language. As we shall see in this demonstration project, interspiritual practitioners hold that this reality is intuited by mystics; hence, mysticism is at the center of the interspiritual perspective.

Interspirituality seems to offer modern humanity the hope that a life where communal boundaries are ambiguous and clear identities erased, a new way of experiencing, understating, and defining one's self and connecting with the world can be created in its place.

I believe that many modern people have found in interspirituality a religious home. Today there is growing interest in the works of people like Eckhart Tolle, Andrew Harvey, Kurt Johnson, Matthew Fox, Father Thomas Keating, as well as increasing fascination with practices like Kabbalah, meditation, centering prayer, chant, and yoga; all are examples of this burgeoning interest in mysticism and the interspiritual approach to the spiritual quest.

I believe that interspirituality amounts to a form of active mystical theology for the modern person. Within this theology strong communal boundaries become more porous, as a result fluid identity is experienced as healthy, and the person is invited to find home in the here and now.

THE SETTING

The setting for this Demonstration Project is One Spirit Interfaith Seminary (One Spirit), where I studied for my ministry and was ordained, served on the Board of Trustees, and where today I work as a dean of first year seminary students. Founded in 2002, One Spirit has graduated and ordained nearly 850 students as of August 2014. The school houses a Seminary, an Interspiritual Counseling program, and a Learning Alliance that provides a forum for respected spiritual teachers to reach the public.

One Spirit's Interfaith Seminary prepares men and women to enter into spiritual ministry from an interspiritual/interfaith perspective, meaning that students are prepared to minister to a world where old religious and spiritual boundaries have broken open. The school's founder and Spiritual Director, Rev. Dr. Diane Berke defines the work of the seminary in these terms:

We embrace and teach the deep truths found at the heart of all authentic spiritual traditions; our shared wealth of spiritual practices that help us evolve and grow; and the commitment found in all traditions to common values of peace, compassion, wisdom, service, and above all, love . . . Our seminary offers you an interspiritual framework to explore these rich wisdom traditions and a safe, nurturing container to deeply explore your own inner life and develop authentic spiritual community.¹³³

In August 2014 a survey of One Spirit graduates -- estimated at 850 -- obtained responses from 420 former students. This survey found that while most students

¹³³ One Spirit Learning Alliance, "Welcome," <http://onespiritinterfaith.org/seminary/overview> (accessed December 18, 2014).

identified as “White or Caucasian” (nearly 79%), over 20% came from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds:

- White or Caucasian 78.61% (316)
- Black or of African Descent 11.69% (47)
- Other 4.48% (18)
- Hispanic or Latino 3.48% (14)
- Asian 1.24% (5)
- American Indian or Alaskan Native 0.5% (2)

There was certainly greater diversity in the spiritual or religious affiliations of the graduates, all of whom are now ordained ministers (respondents were allowed to select more than one faith tradition that would define “their path”):

- Inter-Spiritual/Interfaith (explicitly) 65.19% (264)
- Christianity 34.57% (140)
- Religious Science/New Thought 28.64% (116)
- Buddhism 27.9% (113)
- A Course in Miracles 20.99% (85)
- Native American 18.52% (75)
- Twelve Step Spirituality 16.54% (67)
- Other 15.56% (63)
- Judaism 14.81% (60)
- Hinduism 14.57% (59)
- Taoism 12.1% (49)
- Humanism 9.63% (39)
- Wicca/Paganism 7.41% (30)
- Native African 5.68% (23)
- Islam 5.43% (22)
- Bahá’í 0.49% (2) ¹³⁴

¹³⁴ Results of a survey conducted by Gordon Brode, One Sprit Interfaith Seminary, July 2014.

One Spirit was founded in response to the challenges of the modern world. Created after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the founders of One Spirit Interfaith Seminary came to believe that a learning and training center needed to be created that would bring men and women from all faith backgrounds (and none at all) who were willing and interested in interfaith dialogue and learning. This school would be focused on interspiritual education. It would train ministers committed to a spirit of dialogue, interfaith respect, and healing. One Spirit would respond to the fundamentalist fanaticism represented by 9-11 with a profoundly different vision of religion and faith. This vision was grounded in:

- Respect for the insights of all faiths: At the center of the interspiritual movement is the belief that all the world's faith traditions have at their core enduring truths about the ineffable value of human life, the nature of creation, and the oneness of the reality that binds and sustains it all.
- A commitment to interfaith discourse and learning: Interspiritual practitioners, as we shall see, are inspired and guided by a profound commitment to interfaith exploration, interspiritual practice, and inter-religious dialogue.
- A dedication to sacred service: The final defining quality of any spiritual practice, One Spirit's founders and teachers hold, is the demonstrated willingness of the individual to selflessly serve the well-being of others (especially those in need) and of the whole of creation.

In other words, One Spirit was inspired by a belief that there is another way — radically different from fundamentalism — to live spiritually, religiously in a world defined by rich and complex diversity, as well as life-threatening challenges.

Simply put, One Spirit hoped to provide a space where students from many backgrounds could safely explore the world's wisdom/spiritual traditions, heal personal

and communal wounds, and find the inspiration and acquire the skills to enter a life of sacred service from an interspiritual perspective.

At the core of this work are the interspiritual teachings of the school's founders and teachers. While many of these thought leaders in the interspiritual movement have been at work for nearly 30 years or more, interspirituality remains a relatively young movement (the term itself was coined by Br. Wayne Teasdale in his book *The Mystic Heart* published in November 1999). Consequently these teachings at times lack the clarity and scholarship found in other religious movements and spiritual philosophies.

In spite of this challenge, leaders in interfaith education at One Spirit Interfaith Seminary have developed a comprehensive course of study. One Spirit's two year program is organized around one weekend class, which is normally held the first weekend of every month, from September through May. Nearly every weekend class takes place Saturday and Sunday and runs from 9am to 5pm. Most students attend in-person the class which is held at One Spirit's Manhattan office located at 247 West 37th street in New York City, others attend via live-webinar. In the event students cannot attend in-person or via the web, they are required to listen to an audio of the entire class.

In-class students have the opportunity to engage with experts on the subject in question. This is done in an open classroom setting that includes lecture as well as question & answer sessions. In many cases these experts also provide students with workshop-like sessions that include interactive learning modalities. To prepare for each class students read various sections of required books (which in the first year includes reading from the various sacred texts of the world's religions), engage in spiritual practices associated with the religious tradition or methodology studied that month, meet

with their study groups (most of which meet at least once a month), usually visit a worship service associated with the religion, and finally, respond to a homework questionnaire that must be submitted every month to a dean before the commencement of class (see Appendix B for a copy of a homework questionnaire).

Students also have an electronic bulletin board and Facebook page which allow for on-going dialogue. At the end of both the first and second year there is also an intensive one-week program that allows students the opportunity to review the entire year and assess their individual and collective intellectual, personal, and spiritual growth.

The required text books for the first year include:

- *The World's Religions*, by Houston Smith
- *The World's Wisdom*, by Philip Novak
- *Developing & Deepening Your Spiritual Practice Manual*, by Diane Berke
- *The Ten Challenges*, by Leonard Felder

In the first year of study One Spirit's seminarians focus on developing intellectual mastery of the following areas:

- Mastering the Basic Beliefs Found in the Major Enduring Religious Traditions, which includes:
 - a. Contemporary Spirituality: this includes studying *A Course in Miracles*
 - b. Eastern Religions: Hinduism and Buddhism
 - c. Indigenous & Earth-Based Religions: Yoruba (African Religions) and Native American Spirituality
 - d. Western Religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (with a focus on Sufism)

- The Perennial Philosophy & The Interspiritual Approach
- Integral Theory, which is focused on the work of Ken Wilber
- Psychological Principles for Ministers: This includes Conventional & Transpersonal Psychology
- Basic Counseling Skills
- Applications of Interfaith/Interspiritual Ministry: Death & Dying, Chaplaincy, Spiritual Healing

While the first year is centered on theology, philosophy, and developing an interspiritual theoretical framework (which includes work on integral studies), the second year is much more focused on ministerial skills development. The required text books include:

- *How Can I Help?* By Ram Das
- *Interfaith Ministers' Training and Reference Manual* (Edited and Compiled by Rev. Diane Berke)

In the second year the major areas of study include:

- Making Sense of Life: The Journey from Birth to Death, and the place of ministry
- Creating Rituals & Ceremony
- Providing Personal Encouragement: Prayer Support & Spiritual Counseling
- Offering Collective Inspiration: Creating & Facilitating Liturgy, Worship and Other Meaningful Gatherings
- The Heart of Skillful Service
- Authentic Leadership

The Need

In both the first and second year of study at One Spirit Interfaith Seminary teachers and students rely on the aforementioned books, a few scholarly articles, and other written materials to further their course work. One thing that is missing, however, is

a comprehensive textbook describing interspirituality, its central beliefs, theological issues, and spiritual practices. While there are books and scholarly articles that describe interspiritual journeys and monastic movements there are none that attempt to provide a comprehensive view of interspirituality's central issues, theological positions, and intellectual approaches. Moreover, the movement's openness to a variety of beliefs and approaches to spirituality has also made an attempt at clarification seem presumptuous, and to some even anti-interspiritual. As a result, some students struggle to understand the major issues confronting interspiritual living. The research supporting this Demonstration Project suggests that many interspiritual practitioners:

- Had difficulty defining interspirituality; found it challenging to describe the theory or methodology used to interpret sacred scripture;
- Were open to a deeper exploration on modes of living a spiritual life that requires interfaith dialogue and exploration;
- Often could not clearly explain the value of spiritual practice;
- Finally, they had no clear views on the goal of interspiritual life.¹³⁵

The goal of this Demonstration Project, as clearly defined in the original proposal submitted and accepted by New York Theological Seminary in January 2015, (see Appendix A) was to bring together scholars, ministers, teachers, and practitioners from various faith traditions (and none at all), practicing a myriad of spiritual modalities, to explore the beliefs and practices at the heart of the interspiritual movement.¹³⁶ It was my

¹³⁵ Participants in the survey supporting this Demonstration Project spoke of these challenges during interviews.

¹³⁶ Many of the participants in this Demonstration Project either filled out an extensive survey (see Appendix C) and/or underwent an interview; nearly all were interspiritual leaders affiliated with One Spirit Interfaith Seminary. Others are graduates of the school. The thought leaders were chosen on the basis of their reputations and accomplishments (some were teachers, others well known writers and intellectuals). Practitioners were chosen on the basis of their willingness to be part of this project.

contention that this exploration would allow for the development of a Guidebook, one that was easily accessible to laypeople with little or no training in theology or philosophy, that (1) defined interspirituality; (2) established and explored interspiritual beliefs; (3) analyzed the various approaches taken by interspiritual practitioners on issues such as the interpretation of sacred texts and belonging to more than one spiritual tradition at the same time; (4) and finally, established some of the common spiritual practices of interspiritual people.

Self-Implication: A Challenge to Objectivity

There is one point that I must clarify, this demonstration project did not allow me the privilege of “academic aloofness.” I am a graduate of an interspiritual seminary and today I serve as a Dean in the same seminary; I consider myself a Christian and a Buddhist. In other words, I am an interspiritual practitioner. So there is a self-implicating element to this work. I am not examining this topic from without but from within. As Matthew Wright, an interspiritual practitioner working on a Master’s in Divinity wrote in his master’s thesis:

While self-implication in academic study has traditionally been viewed as a contaminant to objectivity, there is a growing awareness that pure objectivity is impossible, and that it is far more desirable to be honest and critical regarding one’s own vantage point and experience. For Spirituality Studies, however, such transparency is not only desirable, but absolutely necessary, for the discipline of Spirituality “is not only informative but transformative”—and the inner transformations of the scholar are themselves an object of the study.¹³⁷

To this end, I hope within this project to describe the experience of interspiritual practitioners (even as I am transparent that this has been my own journey). In other

¹³⁷ Matthew Wright, “Reshaping Religion: Interspirituality and Multiple Religious Belonging” (MDiv. thesis, Protestant Episcopal Theological Seminary, Virginia, 2012).

words, I hope to explore the process of transformation that I, as well as many other interspiritual practitioners, experience.

THE PROCESS

Initial Research

Using the aforementioned first and second year curriculum, and relying on numerous preliminary conversations with interspiritual practitioners and thought leaders, I began this Demonstration Project with the following two major assumptions: (1) a Guidebook of interspiritual beliefs and practices would help serve the needs of One Spirit seminary students, and potentially help the development of interspiritual thought and practice, and (2) such a Guidebook needed to address the following five major research questions:

1. What is interspirituality and how is it defined?
2. What is the history of interspirituality in the United States?
3. What are the basic beliefs of interspiritual people?
 - a. What is the place of the Perennial Philosophy (which holds that at the core of all the world's different faith traditions there is a recurring truth)?
 - b. What is the place of mysticism in interspirituality?
 - c. What is Integral Theory and how does it inform interspiritual thought?
 - d. How do interspiritual practitioners deal with challenges like interpreting sacred scriptures with their many rival truth claims?
 - e. What approaches do interspiritual practitioners have when confronted with complex and competing theologies?
4. What are some of the major spiritual practices of interspiritual practitioners?
5. What is the ultimate goal of interspiritual practice and life?

Assumption number one will remain the untested aspirations of this project.

Assumptions number two, however, forms its intellectual focus; these five preliminary

research questions guided the initial development of this demonstration project and focused the investigation. The final goal was a *Guidebook to Interspiritual Beliefs and Practices*, exactly as proposed to New York Theological Seminary (NYTS) in January 2015.

It should be noted: while there are numerous other areas covered in the first and second year of study at One Spirit Interfaith Seminary, such as spiritual counseling and direction, death and dying, as well as ritual making and worship-service facilitation, to name a few, I chose not to research these topics or cover them in the Guidebook for two reasons:

- While these topics are central to ministry, they are not important to interspiritual life and practice.
- Teachers and students at One Spirit have access to a host of other resources, including text books and articles, covering these topics in significant detail.

Procedure and Research Methods

With the aforementioned initial work completed (and five preliminary research questions) it was clear that research methodologies had to be decided upon that would help me: (1) Define the final scope of my research (in other words, establish the topics that would finally be researched and covered in the final Guidebook), (2) Test my understanding of these topics against those of active interspiritual practitioners. To that end, I developed in my original proposal to NYTS, a research plan that included the following steps:

Step One:

With the five preliminary investigative questions in hand I began a review of academic literature, books, videos and websites. (While websites are not usually used as

primary sources in research projects such as this, the relative youth of this movement and lack of materials in scholarly journals made it necessary to explore alternative sources of information). I also had a number of informal conversations with leaders in the movements such as Kurt Johnson and Rev. Diane Berke, as well as major practitioners of interspirituality such as Rev. Ingrid Scott and Nomi Naeem. The primary questions I sought to address with this preliminary research were:

- What is interspirituality and how is it defined? (Given the plethora of voices and opinions regarding interspirituality I wondered if it was possible to develop a working definition.)
- What is the theological basis of interspirituality? This included an exploration of the written works of Wayne Teasdale, Houston Smith, and Kurt Johnson; these three thinkers seemed to be the major creative voices developing and defining interspirituality.
- What is the Perennial Philosophy and how is it related to interspirituality? This question focused on the works of Houston Smith.
- What is the relationship of mysticism to interspiritual thinking?
- What is Integral Theory and how does it inform interspiritual thinking and practice? This question focused on the works of Ken Wilber.
- What is the history of the interspiritual movement?

This early research also raised questions regarding eastern religious thought (specifically Hinduism and Buddhism) and its impact on interspiritual thought. Writers such as Kurt Johnson and Wayne Teasdale seemed to have been deeply influenced by eastern thinkers and eastern religious spirituality. For example, Wayne Teasdale was a student of Bede Griffith, a Benedictine monk who went to India and became a Hindu *sannyasin* (practitioner of total renunciation). It also raised questions regarding the

emerging “dual-belonging” phenomenon where a person is said to “belong” usually to two different religious traditions at the same time; for example, Bede Griffith called himself both a Christian and a Hindu. Finally, this research also introduced a new movement within interspirituality referred to as Modern Monasticism. It was soon clear that any Guidebook would also have to address some of these new topics.

Step Two

The initial research helped to establish five preliminary questions to guide our research project. With these questions we then moved into our formal research project. Step One of our formal research project allowed us develop a theoretical framework:

1. I had a working definition of interspirituality.
2. I had an outline of the basic interspiritual beliefs that addressed the following:
 - a. The relationship of the Perennial Philosophy to interspiritual theology.
 - b. The place of mysticism and mystical practices in interspirituality.
 - c. The way Integral Theory informs interspiritual thought.
 - d. The place of sacred texts within interspiritual circles.
3. The numerous approaches taken by interspiritual practitioners when confronted with complex and competing theologies, sacred texts, and the challenge of dual-belonging.
4. I also had a rather comprehensive list of the major spiritual practices of interspiritual practitioners.
5. And finally I had a working theory of the goal of interspiritual practice and life.

In Step Two I sought to test these initial findings (this evolving theoretical framework) by surveying interspiritual thought leaders. In order to reach these people I

developed a list of interspiritual practitioners, scholars, intellectuals, activists, ministers, and teachers. It is my contention that by establishing a practitioner's point of view I could achieve a verity of ends:

- Corroboration on Major Issues: Verify if the issues I sought to cover (represented by my initial five research questions) were in fact comprehensive and inclusive of all major interspiritual concerns and challenges. I was prepared to take issues out of the list or add new ones depending on research findings.
- Confirmation of Theoretical Framework: Confirm my preliminary theoretical framework. I was testing was my understanding of these topics in alignment with those of interspiritual practitioners. Or did I need to make adjustments to my theoretical framework? With regards to major beliefs and ideas, was there alignment between thought leaders and community? Were there new ideas or movements evolving within the community?
- Exploration of Interspiritual Life: I also sought to explore interspirituality from within. By developing a dialogical element to this Demonstration Project (a process of communication between me as researcher and members of the community I sought to understand, define, explain, help guide, and serve) I was open to new findings and insights. Interspirituality is a lived reality for practitioners and by surveying members of the community I was open to the transformative discovery that is available from an encounter with the other.

In the original proposal submitted to NYTS for this Demonstration Project I treated thought leaders and practitioners as two separate communities to be surveyed individually; however, during the course of executing the Demonstration Project it became apparent that for purposes of this survey this distinction was spurious. Given the relative youth of this movement, many practitioners are playing leadership roles in the movement. And all the leaders had active interspiritual practices.

I then developed a questionnaire (found in Appendix C) which was sent out via email (see Appendix D) to interspiritual practitioners, scholars, teachers, and activists. Because the survey sought (1) corroboration on major issues; (2) confirmation of theoretical framework; (3) exploration of interspiritual life, the survey was designed with these goals in mind and hence aligned with the major research questions:

Personal and Demographic Information

- These general questions included: name, email, phone number, age, race, ethnicity, gender, present occupation, place of birthplace, where person was raised, schools, and finally, other personal gifts person wanted to share that affected their spirituality.

SPIRITUAL HISTORIES, THINKING, AND PRACTICE: These questions sought to explore interspiritual practitioner's knowledge of and alignment with the Perennial Philosophy and Integral Theory; they also sought to provide some insight into the approaches taken by interspiritual practitioners to spiritual life; finally, some responses also provided insight into the goal of interspiritual life and practice.

- Were you raised within any specific religious tradition or path? If so, which? Would you describe your family and/ or your childhood as religious?
- How would you describe "spirituality"?
- How would you describe "religion"?
- What are some of your earliest spiritual/ religious memories?
- How would you describe your spiritual journey?
- Have you had any experience that you would define as "spiritual" in nature that significantly influenced your evolution? (Please describe this experience.)
- How would you describe your spirituality today?
- How would you describe your Theology? (Theology simply defined as the ideas, beliefs or philosophy that informs and/or explains your faith or spirituality.)

- Does God (or any concept of Deity or Deities) have any place in your spirituality?
- If God or Deities do have a place in your spirituality, please describe your understanding of God or Deities.

INTELLECTUAL AND SPIRITUAL INFLUENCES: These questions also sought to explore the spiritual and intellectual life of interspiritual practitioners.

- Name your most influential spiritual teachers.
- What religious or spiritual texts, if any, do you look to for guidance?

PERSONAL UNDERSTANDING AND DEFINITION OF INTERSPIRITUALITY: These questions sought to test my working definition of interspirituality.

- How would you define interspirituality?
- Would you define yourself as interspiritual?

MYSTICISM AND INTERSPIRITUAL PRACTICE: These questions explored the place of mysticism and mystical practices in interspirituality.

- What, if any, is the relationship of mysticism to interspirituality?
- How would you describe mysticism?
- Would you describe yourself a mystic? If so, why?

HERMENEUTICAL METHODOLOGIES USED BY THE INTERSPIRITUAL PRACTITIONERS: These questions explored the place of sacred texts within interspiritual circles.

- Do you believe there is a difference between a “spiritual text” and a “sacred text”? If so, what is the difference?
- In your view what norms or standards establish a text as sacred?
- How would you describe your method (or theory) of interpretation of sacred texts?
- How have experiences with multiple religious traditions influenced your interpretation of sacred texts?

- How do your political values and social commitments influence your interpretation of sacred texts?
- How did formal education at any level affect your interpretation of sacred texts? If you have had technical or professional training in non-religious fields, how does this bear upon your way of reading sacred texts?
- What other differentiating factors from social or cultural life affect your interpretation of sacred texts?

PERSONAL SPIRITUAL PRACTICES: These questions delved into the place of spiritual practices in interspiritual life.

- What is a “spiritual practice”?
- What, if any, are your spiritual practices? How often do you engage in these?
- What is the value of spiritual practice?

OPEN QUESTION: This question allowed practitioners to share any other thoughts or feelings they may have had regarding their spirituality or the survey process.

- Is there anything else you would like to share?

Step Three

Around November of 2015 I began to assemble all my research notes and survey findings. At about this time I also had a working Table of Contents for the Guidebook. With the Guidebook as the primary goal of this demonstration project, I then began to write the major chapters of the Guidebook. The fundamental findings of the research component of this demonstration project are in fact found within the pages of the Guidebook found herein. The first draft was provided to numerous interspiritual practitioners and thought leaders, as well as my site team, for review and feedback. The comments made by the first reviewers were then used to edit the first draft of the demonstration project. The second draft was then submitted to my NYTS faculty advisor for her comments. And the third and final draft will be submitted to NYTS.

Results and Evaluation of Step One

Formally begun in January 2015, step one was largely completed by the end of June 2015. However, this form of research continued throughout the life of the project as I often had to return to original sources to clarify various points, and deep the intellectual reach of the project. Nevertheless, by June 2015 I was able to develop a clear and documented definition of interspirituality that I believe is largely consistent with the writings of its major proponents (specifically Wayne Teasdale and Kurt Johnson). Moreover, I was able to outline the major theological basis of interspirituality. I also had a working definition of mysticism (as understood by interspiritual practitioners) and a well-supported theory explaining the relationship of mysticism to interspiritual theology. I also had a working theory of the relationship of Integral Theory to interspirituality. Finally, I had a preliminary understanding of the various approaches taken by interspiritual people when confronted with challenges such deciding what texts were sacred and interpreting such texts.

However, I also concluded that the complexity of this project and the limitation of time made it nearly impossible to develop a written history of the interspiritual movement. My research suggested that what we today call interspirituality began to enter western consciousness in the late 1800s with the advent of the Parliament of World Religions playing a seminal role. It then continued to develop as a consequence of inter-religious and philosophical dialogue with Hindu and other eastern thinkers. The Theosophists, the exploration of eastern spirituality in the 1960s, along with a host of other esoteric, artistic, philosophical, and religious movements, also played a role in the evolution of interspiritual thought and practice. In other words, this complex intellectual history requires significant and careful historical research to fully develop; so I decided to

omit this as a research topic and potential Guidebook chapter. The development of this history of interspirituality is the only goal established in the proposal that was not achieved.

Results and Evaluation of Step Two

Step two was completed on or around November 2015 (some surveys were received in December). By September 2015 I had completed and emailed the surveys. By November I had received nearly all the surveys used in this demonstration project. These surveys were instrumental in helping to:

- Corroborate the major issues I had identified at the beginning of this demonstration project. No new issues arose during the process and many of the survey respondents felt that issues or topics I had initially established did in fact constitute the heart and soul of interspirituality.
- Confirm my preliminary theoretical framework. A review of the surveys suggests that my understanding of the central issues of interspirituality was largely in alignment with those of interspiritual practitioners. The surveys seemed to largely confirm my working definition and description of interspiritual theology. They also seemed to corroborate the relationship of mysticism to interspirituality. The surveys also helped to provide a window into the approaches taken by interspiritual practitioners when confronted with issues as complex as interpreting sacred texts. And finally, they provided insight into the place of spiritual practice within interspiritual life.
- Finally, exploring interspiritual belief and practice through the dialogical process of a survey lead to the discovery of two major developing issues within interspiritual circles: (1) the emerging interest in ecological health and interspiritual practice; and (2) the growing interest in and need for greater racial and ethnic diversity. Future research and examination of interspiritual life and practice will require an exploration of these two emerging issues.

Results and Evaluation of Step Three

This third step in the demonstration development process was itself dialogical in nature. The feedback was largely very positive as many practitioners felt that the Guidebook would prove a profoundly helpful tool to interspiritual/ interfaith seminarians and practitioners. I do wish that there was greater clarity at New York Theological Seminary regarding the difference between a doctoral dissertation and demonstration project, as it would have helped to clarify some of the issues that arose between my faculty advisor and me. Nonetheless, the process proved to be profoundly enriching. The final and rightful evolution of this demonstration project will be a function of two still unachieved milestones: (1) will this demonstration project be finally accepted by NYTS, and even more importantly (2) will the final product prove a useful tool to interspiritual practitioners, students, and ministers in their life and practice.

EVALUATION OF THIS DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

This demonstration project has three primary areas requiring evaluation:

1. Methodology for Implementation: Within the section entitled, “The Process: Procedures and Research Methods: Results and Evaluation,” the research methodology originally proposed in the proposal and its milestones are examined.
2. Ministerial Competencies: In the section under this name each individual competency that was originally established in the proposal is defined and evaluated. This evaluation is the product of dialogue between the writer and Site Team.
3. Over all Achievement: The primary objective of this demonstration project was to develop a Guidebook of interspiritual beliefs and practices using a clearly defined model of research and dialogue. This model (requiring extensive research) brought together a community of interspiritual thought leaders and practitioners. This primary objective has been achieved with the submission of this demonstration project; within these pages is a Guidebook that:
 - Defines interspirituality;
 - Explores the basic beliefs and intellectual approaches of interspiritual practitioners;
 - Establishes the common practices of interspiritual people.

MINISTERIAL COMPETENCIES

The work required in the implementation of this demonstration project provided opportunities to develop or enhance various ministerial competencies. These competencies were identified and agreed upon by my site team, and then clearly defined in the original proposal for this project. Below is an evaluation made in concert with the site team of these competencies.

Competency: Knowledge and appreciation of the values of other faith traditions

A multifaith minister must also be knowledgeable and show appreciation for faith traditions that are not his or her own. She or he must be capable of demonstrating how an appreciation of the other in particular is grounded in one's own faith tradition, capable of hearing and responding to the value of faith traditions of others, and able to encourage others to grow within a wider multifaith context.

Strategy: The interspiritual movement is relatively young. In the process of exploring interspirituality's meaning, significant sensitivity and understanding had to be exercised. Some people who are deemed part of this movement did not necessarily even use the term interspiritual to define themselves, their spirituality, or their life's work. As a result, this demonstration project required the creation of safe multifaith spaces where men and women from a variety of religious traditions, spiritual paths, and life experiences came together to speak of their personal spiritual journey and beliefs and its relationship to the interspiritual movement. As a result the following skills had to be exercised:

- The ability to work with and collaborate with people of diverse and complex backgrounds.
- The ability to dialogue respectfully and intelligibly with people of different religious backgrounds and spiritual perspectives and identities.
- The ability to form bonds of trust with, and between, people of different spiritual and religious backgrounds.
- The ability to hear, understand and translate others' unique personal challenges, spiritual experiences, and theological opinions.
- The capacity to plan and execute plans, compromise and achieve goals within a multifaith context.
- The ability to bring together men and women of different backgrounds to form safe spaces where everyone is respected, heard, not judged, and understood.

Evaluation Competency One: This competency was successfully achieved: (1) I was able to get the cooperation of major figures, including Dr. Kurt Johnson, Rev. Dr. Diane Berke, Rev. Dr. Joyce Liechenstein, Adam Bucko, and others who are leaders and practitioners in the Interspiritual movement. (2) I developed a definition of interspirituality and successfully explored the various common beliefs and approaches used by various thought leaders and practitioners, (3) I was able to ascertain the motivations, personal experiences, values, and vision that motivated men and women who are part of this movement in the world of spirituality.

Competency: Ability to interpret sacred texts

Using appropriate language, with sensitivity to the texts and identities of others, and demonstrating effectiveness in communicating one's ideas, an interpreter of sacred texts presents researched, organized, well-prepared, sermons or other similar forms of

proclamation that are relevant and challenging to the listener's life and spiritual development.

Strategy: This demonstration project required an exploration of the relationship of interspiritual practitioners to the sacred texts of various traditions. This posed a series of challenges, not the least of which was exploring the meaning of the term sacred within the interspiritual movement. I also had to understand how interspiritual practitioners related to sacred texts. And how they "interpreted" these texts within a multifaith (which is to say, interspiritual) context. Therefore, the following skills had to be demonstrated:

- An understanding of each wisdom traditions' history, writings, and basic teachings, and how this translated within the interspiritual community.
- An ability to work with scholars and scholarly texts in each tradition to identify the best translations and understand the prevailing interpretations.
- An ability to explore each tradition (and interspirituality itself) with respect for the dignity of its own history, language, theological claims, and interpretive theory.
- Knowledge of each tradition's texts and scholarship, especially as it relates to interspiritual claims and mysticism.
- An ability to interpret and translate complex ideas from sacred texts into modern language.

Evaluation Competency Two: This competency was successfully demonstrated: (1) I was able to work with interspiritual leaders and practitioners to identify the major sacred texts that are used within the interspiritual community. (2) I was able to identify the major factors informing the designation of a text as "sacred." (3) I was also able to identify the major hermeneutical methodologies used by interspiritual persons when interpreting sacred texts.

Competency: Knowledge and appreciation of the values of other faith traditions

A multifaith minister must also be knowledgeable and show appreciation for faith traditions that are not his or her own. She or he must be capable of demonstrating how an

appreciation of the other in particular is grounded in one's own faith tradition, capable of hearing and responding to the value of faith traditions of others, and able to encourage others to grow within a wider multifaith context.

Strategy: One of the primary ways this project studied the beliefs found among people who call themselves interspiritual was through the use of a questionnaire (see Appendix C) and interviews with practitioners within this movement. This dialogue required openness, respect, the ability to create safe-space, a sensitivity to differences in language and culture, and an ability to hear and understand men and women from a variety of backgrounds, with a diversity of perspectives, ideas, and feelings. This dialogue required a deep understanding of the experiences of people whose belief systems are complex, innovative, in some cases syncretic, and also unorthodox. During the course of implementing this project I had to demonstrate the following skills:

- The ability to bring together people of diverse and complex backgrounds and beliefs.
- The ability to dialogue respectfully and intelligibly with people of different religious backgrounds and spiritual perspectives and identities.
- The ability to form bonds of trust with people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs.
- The ability to translate complex belief and value systems, in many cases different from my own, into simple, intelligible, and respectful language that accurately describes the matter in question.

Evaluation Competency Three: This competency was successful: (1) I was able to get the consent of interspiritual believers and practitioners to in-depth interviews regarding their beliefs and spirituality. (2) I was able to establish and explain the beliefs, practices, and moral vision that motivate interspiritual leaders and practitioners.

Competency: Ability to engage productively in dialogue

Ministry in a multifaith context necessarily requires an ability to engage in dialogue with other faith traditions, and with those who hold different faith commitments.

Strategy: This demonstration project required the creation of safe multifaith spaces for the purpose of dialogue. In these spaces men and women from a variety of religious traditions, spiritual paths, personal backgrounds, and experiences came together and shared deeply personal commitments to spiritual practices, some of which may be the object of criticism and even ridicule within mainstream religious communities. This required the highest level of sensitivity and respect. During the course of this project the following skills were demonstrated:

- The ability to bring together people of diverse and complex backgrounds and beliefs in spaces where everyone felt respected, heard, not judged, and understood.
- The ability to dialogue respectfully and intelligibly with people of different religious backgrounds and spiritual perspectives and identities.
- The ability to form bonds of trust with people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs.
- The ability to hear, comprehend, and communicate people's unique personal spiritual experiences, history, and theological/spiritual opinions.
- The ability to bring together men and women of different backgrounds to form safe

Evaluation Competency Four: This competency was successfully demonstrated: (1) I was able to get the consent of interspiritual believers and practitioners to in-depth questionnaires (see Appendix C) and interviews regarding their spiritual practices. (2) I was also able to name, describe, and explain the major practices of interspiritual people.

MY PERSONAL JOURNEY OF TRANSFORMATION

When I started the Doctor of Ministry program I was focused on doing a demonstration project exploring mysticism. As a child I had a profound and powerful interest in mysticism and contemplation. At the age of six I told my mother that I wanted to be a monk and live in a hermitage; to this day I wonder if I had any idea what I was saying. All I can remember thinking at that age was that monks were very calm, gentle people who were close to God. And I wanted to be like that!

In my teenage years I was convinced that mystics were people who had what I described in a college paper as “direct personal experience of God.” I must have been 19 years old when I wrote that paper. I was convinced that mystics were among the world’s most fortunate people. They knew what others could only surmise...they lived on knowledge while the rest of us had to make due with faith. Faith in my view was fraught with uncertainty, with anxiety; knowledge was not. Knowledge was sure, clear, and confident. Simply put, in my youthful view mystics were certain that life had meaning, depth, purpose. They knew God, while the rest of us only knew about God.

The passage of time added a new dimension to my interest in mysticism and spirituality. As a young adult, while in college, I moved from a deep childhood faith in Christianity to existentialism. I read Sartre and Camus. And I concluded that God was dead and life was without meaning, save the meaning we created ourselves. As I entered my late 20s, however, the encounter with HIV/AIDS and its devastating effect on my community lead me back to the church. I determined that Kierkegaard was right, only a

leap of faith keeps one from falling into an abyss of hopelessness and despair. During this time I turned to a mystic, St. Francis of Assisi. There was something in his faith, a faith defined by a deep love of creation and a profound commitment to the poor that I found moving, even transformative. This more mature perspective was grounded in my new found sense that my spirituality had to be an expression of my values... my faith had to affirm my experience, not condemn and devalue it.

By that time in my life I was no longer the young Latino kid living in the South Bronx; I had lived and loved. I had come out of the closet as a Gay man. I had traveled the world, met new people, explored new cultures and faiths, and knew that much of what I thought was true in religion was in fact outdated and even harmful. (Yes, the sexism and homophobia that passed for theology was harmful.) While I was able to find much beauty in Christianity (and in a spiritual life) I could no longer accept the dogmatism and literalism that seemed so essential to some forms of Christian expression. God was no longer a white old man, out there in heaven, who was distant and judgmental. My consciousness had matured: God was metaphor for profound mystery; if God was anything God was a reality that could be sensed, even realized, but never known.

By my late 30s I seemed to be flowing away from Christianity as I had known it in my youth and I certainly still treasured spirituality. To me spirituality at its best amounted to a commitment to take seriously the inner life. Spirituality acknowledges the very human need to live a life exploring ultimate meaning, purpose, and above all connection. Spirituality recognizes that the human heart is as important to a whole life as the human mind, that knowledge without wisdom ultimately turns to ignorance, and that love and connection are the most essential needs of the human spirit. Above all,

spirituality, as I knew it, acknowledged that life is deeper, more complex, and infinitely richer than any theology, formula, or explanation.

About this time I started to explore my own mind in therapy, and I discovered Mark Epstein, a Harvard trained psychiatrist. Mark was a Buddhist and meditator who wrote brilliantly about mindfulness and Buddhist spirituality. Here was a person who was attempting to reconcile spirituality and science. I read everything he wrote and began a meditation practice.

Nevertheless, I never let go of Christianity, I realized that my spiritual life is, to an extent, an expression of the Christian narrative. Christianity taught me that spirituality points us to a deeper reality. Moreover, whatever God is, God is about incarnation. Divinity is vibrantly alive in creation. Everything is sacred. And there is a possibility of relationship with this truth.

Buddhism allowed me to add a new dimension to my spiritual life and practice. It taught me that much of what I call my life is in my mind. To transform my mind is to transform my life. Suffering and joy, Buddhism teaches, are my creation. Pain is inevitable, suffering is not. And ultimate reality is beyond conceptuality, but not beyond experience.

Nearly twelve years to the day I began to meditate and call myself a Christian/Buddhist I discovered One Spirit and the interfaith/interspiritual world. I entered seminary with a desire to learn more about faith and religion. By the time I was ordained an interfaith/interspiritual minister I had learned a lot about myself as a spiritual explorer. Regardless of where I was in my spiritual journey, I was always a mystic. That was my true deepest spiritual identity.

So when I began the program at New York Theological Seminary (NYTS) I was convinced that I had to return to my roots and explore mysticism. I was asking myself, what was there in mysticism that so attracted me? At first I was going to write a paper on how people like myself, people with complex and multiple identities (the exiles, the excluded, the spiritual but not religious, those practicing multiple religious belonging, etc.) found in mysticism a spiritual home. Modern people, I came to believe, were giving up on dogma, spiritual literalism, religious hierarchy, and tribal exclusion. Many people have begun to focus on the core of spiritual life and the heart of religious expression... and that core, that heart, was a mystical orientation to life.

Mysticism is an orientation to life that gives meaning to existence, intuit's purpose to creation, and lives in a profound loving relationship with life. Mysticism is an orientation to life that seeks spiritual experience over religious certainty, and judges the value of religious and spiritual life by its ability to inspire, guide, and cause transformation.

Then one day in seminary class one of my teachers, Dr. Wanda Lundy, said something that clarified my thinking; the Demonstration Project is about you, she said! It is an expression of you! Make it personal. I realized that at the core of the demonstration project was my own journey.

I knew that the demonstration project, like any doctoral dissertation, had to be a contribution to the field of ministry, religion, and/or spirituality. In light of this fact, Dr. Lundy's statement came to mean that I should make a contribution that is a true expression of my life and personal journey. It should be a contribution that honors what I uniquely have to give. Dr. Lundy invited me to ask the question, how can I give myself to

my community? The answer slowly emerged; help others on the same spiritual path. Provide them with some guidance that would support and assist them as they walk this interspiritual path, the path of the modern mystic.

And so was born the idea of *Interspirituality: A Guidebook to Belief and Practice*. I finally decided on a demonstration project that would conclude with the development of a resource that would provide guidance on the emerging beliefs and spiritual practices of modern mystics. And by modern I mean mystics who do not necessarily belong to any one religious faith but seek to honor them all. These are people who sincerely believe that the world's enduring religious and spiritual traditions are different paths to one enduring reality...these traditions are all different poems inspired by and speaking of the same source.

I concluded that to do this I would need to consult with interspiritual scholars and practitioners, for this purpose I developed and administered a survey and in some cases I interviewed members of the interspiritual community. The process was meant to be exhaustive, dialogical, and open. I wanted to expose myself to all the sources, exhaustively. In some cases these sources would be books and articles written by thought leaders. In others I would have the opportunity for dialogue.

Dialogue I thought would provide me the opportunity to bring my own life, my own struggles, my own assumptions, aspirations, beliefs, and practices into the process. Finally I realized that I gave myself to my community by bringing all of myself into the process. I was, in a way, exploring and expressing my journey. Dialogue would allow for an encounter; within this encounter I opened my life to others and others would open their lives to me. Dialogue depends on an encounter defined by openness and honesty. At

its deepest, dialogue is an exchange grounded in a willingness to be changed. No one can truly encounter the other without experiencing some form of personal transformation.

The demonstration project gave me an opportunity to explore other people's sacred journeys, spiritual epiphanies, and personal tragedies. I came to see firsthand how spirituality is in essence a word we use for a way of life that's about all of life. It is about joy and loss, faith and doubt, community and solitude. It is not other worldly, but at its best it is about this world, this life we have now. Spirituality is about exploring, deepening, honoring and celebrating our humanity. Finally, spirituality is also about creating spaces that allow our human life to expand, to grow, to evolve, to transform.

As the demonstration project developed I found my own understanding of interspirituality flourishing and my commitment to it deepening. I began to understand that at its best interspirituality is indeed a form of modern mysticism. And by this I mean that interspirituality takes seriously the mystic's belief that it is possible to have an experience of the deepest truth. And that this experience can be transformative of consciousness. The modern mystic takes all the world's faiths seriously, honoring their unique visions, and using their wisdom as vehicles for personal change. At its deepest interspirituality is itself a dialogic process. It is a way of opening one's life to the other with the realization that doing so will be transformative.

When I began this journey I wrote a proposal, and that proposal had an opening reflection focused on my sense of self. I wrote:

Like so many of my generation, I am a member of numerous communities to which I belong and from which I feel alienated; communities where I feel at home and where I feel a stranger. My identity, my sense of self, is a cauldron of contradiction, a patchwork of distinct identities and affiliations. I am a man and I am Gay. I am Latino and I am American. I am of European, African, indigenous and Afro-Caribbean ancestry. I am

fair skinned and I am a man of color. Born into poverty, and raised in an American ghetto (the South Bronx), today I am middle-class and live in an upscale Manhattan neighborhood. Once I was only expected to be an American, I am now also expected to be a global citizen. I am Christian and I am Buddhist. I am an administrator of scientific research at a major American university, which is to say that I am a man of scholarship, thought, and reason. Nonetheless, I am also a man who believes in the necessity of the spiritual journey and the value of religious community. Like many modern men and women, my sense of self is grounded in multiplicity, plurality, a variety of participation, even contradiction.

These words began the major part of the journey that is this demonstration project. With these words I made myself a mirror of my generation. With these words I handed my life and story to this process...I made of myself a resource for this work, and more importantly, I made myself a resource for my community. Just as Dr. Lundy said, this demonstration project was indeed a journey into my life, and a journey far beyond it.

Many of us have identities born of contradiction, complexity, ambiguity, even conflict. Interspirituality –mysticism – moves our focus beyond these contradictions to a fullness that lies at the core. This project helped in the continued evolution of my understanding and transformation of my consciousness. I have come to realize that we may use whatever words please us – mysticism, interspiritual, spirituality, religion – in the end these words describe tools. At their best these tools help us see beyond the realm of the concepts that we use to define ourselves and others. These tools help us see (indeed, experience) that we are always more... and within this more rests a profound and unfathomable mystery. And we are that mystery too. To know this, to realize this, frees us from the prison of confining categories and connects us to each other and to all creation in a new and powerful way. To finally live from the fullness that embraces all the contradictions and multiplicity, as well as the unity and the Oneness, is to be fully human. This is what it means to be a modern mystic.

APPENDICES

Appendix A:
Demonstration Project Proposal

INTERSPIRITUALITY:
A GUIDE TO BELIEFS AND PRACTICES

By

JOSÉ M. ROMÁN

DEMONSTRATION PROJECT PROPOSAL

2015

New York Theological Seminary

Challenge Statement

Interspirituality is a growing movement among people of faith. Defined as mysticism in action, the Interspiritual practitioner seeks to find the “experiential reality” common to all the world’s spiritual paths. In short, interspirituality holds that all the world’s religions and wisdom traditions are born of mystical experience; then this mystical experience slowly evolves into language, texts, rituals, beliefs, teaching, practices, and over time a history and tradition. Interspirituality holds that if you find the mystical truth common to all the faiths, the traditions open up in a new way; old tribal boundaries can be transformed. Nonetheless, while this movement is growing there are very few books, and even fewer scholarly articles, exploring this spiritual/religious movement. This demonstration project will develop an educational model that will bring together interspiritual intellectuals, scholars, and practitioners for the purpose of developing the first comprehensive guidebook describing interspirituality’s history, theology, beliefs and practices.

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CHAPTER ONE INTRODUCTION TO THE SETTING

I am a member of numerous communities (numerous tribes) to which I belong and from which I feel alienated; communities where I feel at home and where I feel a stranger. My identity, my sense of self, is a cauldron of contradiction, a patchwork of distinct identities and affiliations. I am a man and I am Gay. I am Latino and I am American. I am of European, African, indigenous and Afro-Caribbean ancestry. I am fair skinned and I am a man of color. Born into poverty, today I am middle-class. Once I was only expected to be an American, I am now also expected to be a global citizen. I am Christian and I am Buddhist. I am an administrator of scientific research at a major American university, which is say that I am a man of scholarship, thought, and reason. Nonetheless, I am also a man who believes in the necessity of the spiritual journey and the value of religious community. Like many modern people, my sense of self is grounded in multiplicity, plurality, a variety of participation, even contradiction.

In this modern world identity is often born of belonging and transgressing social boundaries. In short, one belongs to many tribes, many communities, and also feels oneself an outsider in nearly all. More and more we are giving birth to generations of people whose sense of community and identity, whose very sense of self, is deeply challenged. A growing number of us are holders of multiple, at times, competing identities.

Migration, urbanization, globalization, and the emergence of cyber-communities, have caused a tear in the fabric of social cohesion; the sense of belonging, the sense of community, the construction of identity, and the sense of self are all in flux. As a result, in the modern world identity is often accompanied by a growing sense of confusion, anxiety, alienation, and even isolation.

In the realm of faith, spirituality and religion the phenomenon of multiple identities and tribal transgressions are growing seemingly exponentially. Christians now practice Buddhist meditation; Buddhists engage in Jewish prayer; Jews explore Hindu chat; Sufis practice yoga; Catholic priests quote Sikh gurus. And a growing community of people define themselves as “spiritual but not religious” (so-called SBNRs). And studies show that many of these people engage in a myriad of spiritual practices usually from a multiplicity of faith traditions.

We live in a time where the theologies, rituals, sacred texts, teachers, and practitioners of various faith traditions are mixing, mingling, colliding. And within this phenomenon there is even an emerging language; we now use phrases like interfaith, multi-faith, Jewbu, spiritual but not religious, bi-ritual, cafeteria Catholic.

I hold that within this growing community of spiritual explorers and religious plurality is an evolving movement that hopes to birth wholeness out of confusion; a movement that turns tribal transgression and multiplicity of identity into sources of strength rather than weakness. And then seeks to transcend both. This movement has a name: *Interspirituality*.

Interspirituality has been called “mysticism in action.” It is a movement that holds that the world’s enduring religious traditions all spring from a common mystical

experience or insight. Within the interspiritual movement language, sacred texts, hermeneutics, theology, rituals, and practices are used as a means of working through the anxieties and contradictions of modern life.

Interspirituality seems to offer modern humanity the hope that a life where tribal boundaries are ambiguous and clear identities erased, a new way of understating and defining one's self and connecting with the world can be created in its place. Interspirituality holds that people can experience a reality where the parts are always changing and incomplete but the whole remains one.

This demonstration project will bring together scholars, ministers, teachers, and practitioners from various faith traditions (and none at all), practicing a myriad of spiritual modalities, all with the goal of developing a compressive guide-book describing the history, theologies, beliefs and practices at the heart of the interspiritual movement.

The Project will take place at One Spirit Interfaith Seminary (One Spirit), where I studied for my ministry and was ordained. Founded in 2002, One Spirit has graduated and ordained nearly 850 students as of August 2014. The school houses a Seminary, an Interspiritual Counseling program, and a Learning Alliance that provides a forum for respected spiritual teachers to reach the public.

One Spirit's Interfaith Seminary, which will be the setting of this project, prepares men and women to enter into spiritual ministry from an interspiritual/interfaith perspective, meaning that students are prepared to minister to a world where old religious and spiritual boundaries have broken open. The school's founder and Spiritual Director, Rev. Dr. Diane Burke defines the work of the seminary in these terms:

We embrace and teach the deep truths found at the heart of all authentic spiritual traditions; our shared wealth of spiritual practices that help us evolve and grow; and the commitment found in all traditions to common values of peace, compassion, wisdom, service, and above all, love . . . Our seminary offers you an *interspiritual framework* [my emphasis] to explore these rich wisdom traditions and a safe, nurturing container to deeply explore your own inner life and develop authentic spiritual community.¹

In August 2014 a survey of One Spirit graduates -- estimated at 850 -- obtained responses from 420 former students. This survey found that while most students identified as “White or Caucasian” (nearly 79%), over 20% came from a variety of racial and ethnic backgrounds:

- American Indian or Alaskan Native 0.5% (2)
- Asian 1.24% (5)
- Black or of African Descent 11.69% (47)
- Hispanic or Latino 3.48% (14)
- White or Caucasian 78.61% (316)
- Other 4.48% (18)

There was certainly greater diversity in the spiritual or religious affiliations of the graduates, all of whom are now ordained ministers (respondents were allowed to select more than one faith tradition that would define “their path”):

- Bahá’í 0.49% (2)
- Buddhism 27.9% (113)
- Christianity 34.57% (140)
- A Course in Miracles 20.99% (85)
- Hinduism 14.57% (59)
- Humanism 9.63% (39)
- Inter-Spiritual/Interfaith (explicitly) 65.19% (264)
- Islam 5.43% (22)
- Judaism 14.81% (60)
- Native American 18.52% (75)
- Native African 5.68% (23)
- Religious Science/New Thought 28.64% (116)

¹ One Spirit Learning Alliance, “Welcome,” <http://onespiritinterfaith.org/seminary/overview>, (accessed December 18, 2014).

- Taoism 12.1% (49)
 - Twelve Step Spirituality 16.54% (67)
 - Wicca/Paganism 7.41% (30)
 - Other 15.56% (63)
- Finally the respondents also engaged in a variety of spiritual practices born from

an assortment of religious and spiritual traditions:

- Breath work 43.98% (179)
- Chanting 42.26% (172)
- Dancing 23.34% (95)
- Divination 16.22% (66)
- Exercise 42.51% (173)
- Fasting 12.29% (50)
- Forgiveness 66.83% (272)
- Journaling 47.91% (195)
- Lectio Divina 12.78% (52)
- Martial arts 2.7% (11)
- Meditation 81.08% (330)
- Nature, engaging with 62.41% (254)
- Prayer 82.8% (337)
- Sacred reading 66.58% (271)
- Shamanic journey 18.92% (77)
- Silence 68.55% (279)
- Twelve step 19.41% (79)
- Visioning 37.1% (151)
- Yoga 34.89% (142)
- Other 16.71% (68)²

One Spirit was founded in response to the challenges of the modern world.

Created right after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the school hoped to provide a space where students from many backgrounds could safely explore the world's wisdom/spiritual traditions, heal personal and communal wounds, and find the inspiration and acquire the skills to enter a life of sacred service from an interspiritual perspective. At the core of this work is the interspiritual theology of the school's founders and

² Results of a survey conducted by Gordon Brode, One Sprit Interfaith Seminary, July 2014.

teachers. Nonetheless, while One Spirit teachers and students rely on a variety of books, scholarly articles, and other written materials to do their work, there is no text book describing interspirituality's history, theology, beliefs and practices. At its conclusion this demonstration project will:

- Develop an educational model that will help bring together a community of students, scholars, and spiritual activists who will help define and describe interspirituality's history, theology, beliefs and practices.
- Develop the first comprehensive guide book describing interspirituality's history, theology, beliefs, and practices.

CHAPTER 2 PRELIMINARY ANALYSIS OF THE CHALLENGE

Challenge Statement

Interspirituality is a growing movement among people of faith. Defined as mysticism in action, the Interspiritual practitioner seeks to find the “experiential reality” common to all the world’s spiritual paths. In short, interspirituality holds that all the world’s religions and wisdom traditions are born of mystical experience; then this mystical experience slowly evolves into language, texts, rituals, beliefs, teaching, practices, and over time a history and tradition. Interspirituality holds that if you find the mystical truth common to all the faiths, the traditions open up in a new way; old tribal boundaries can be transformed. Nonetheless, while this movement is growing there are very few books, and even fewer scholarly articles, exploring this spiritual/religious movement. This demonstration project will develop an educational model that will bring together interspiritual intellectuals, scholars, and practitioners for the purpose of developing the first comprehensive guidebook describing interspirituality’s history, theology, beliefs and practices.

In the same manner that race, color, gender, ethnicity, social/economic strata, nationality, sexual orientation and gender expression, have all become increasingly complex and fluid, religious and spiritual identity is also undergoing transformation. In this intimate personal realm, the realm of religion and spirituality, old boundaries are porous. Through multiple social processes (urbanization, globalization, intermarriage, religious migration, and the phenomena of “spirituality without religion” to name a few) we now find people who claim to be:

- **Bi-ritual:** This phenomenon is normally found in families with one or more faith traditions where a conscious decision has been made to celebrate/maintain the rituals of multiple faiths. (Like celebrating Passover, Hanukkah, the Christian Eucharist, and Christmas).
- **Faithful But:** These are people who maintain ties to the faith tradition of their birth, but strongly question many of that faith’s teachings. (*Cafeteria Catholics* is

a deprecatory moniker used in the Roman Catholic Church for these people within that tradition.)

- **Interfaith:** These are people interested in inter-religious dialogue, often for the purpose of enhancing their own religious understanding and commitments.
- **Spiritual But Not Religious:** These people are not part of any organized religion but continue to express “spiritual” views; they often also engage in practices born within organized religious traditions (yoga, meditation, prayer, fasting, spiritual healing modalities, etc.).
- **Spiritual Migrants:** These are people who have left the faith they were born into and now practice another adopted tradition.

In each of these phenomena one finds people transgressing traditional religious boundaries and creating new identities. And they do so out of an existential imperative, a sense that some part of them will never be whole if all they do is accept (or try to live up to) the inherited norm. They experience a profound imperative – if you will, they experience *a call* – to move into uncharted territory of spiritual consciousness.

In other words, at some point there is a sense that old tribal identities are creating profound and painful dissonance . . . a lack of personal wholeness or integrity. Where in the past integrity laid with accepting the social (one can say *tribal*) boundaries as inherited, today integrity for a growing number of people lies in enlarging those boundaries or destroying them altogether.

In the realm of spirituality and religion this experience – the experience of moving beyond the bounded, clearly defined world of one’s own spiritual community and religion – has led to an increasing interest in interspirituality and the mystical roots of the world’s great religions.

As stated earlier in this proposal interspirituality holds that all the enduring faith traditions are expressions of a common mystical experience or insight. Mysticism, therefore, is at the heart of this movement. To understand interspirituality one must explore mystical theology. Mysticism holds that union with or absorption into “God,” “the absolute,” or the “realization” of knowledge inaccessible to the intellect, can be attained in this lifetime by the individual human person. The mystic is one who lives in daily communion with the absolute, or as a mystic would say, the truly real. Wayne Teasdale defines mysticism in his book, *The Mystic Heart*, as “direct, immediate experience of ultimate reality.”³

I believe that many modern people have found in mysticism (and, hence, interspirituality) a religious home. Today there is growing interest in the works of people like Eckhart Tolle, Andrew Harvey, Matthew Fox, Father Thomas Keating, as well as increasing fascination with practices like Kabbalah, meditation, chant, and yoga; all are examples of this burgeoning interest in mysticism and the interspiritual approach to the spiritual quest. In short, there is a growing willingness to engage in interspiritual exploration. I believe that many intuit that within this exploration there may be a key to both understand and heal their world. As stated before, the world of many modern people is a world where old communal boundaries are broken and identities are in flux. The mystic – in other words, the interspiritual practitioner – is one seeking to move beyond the hold and seemingly fixed nature of identity, theology, and categories. Teasdale says it best: “Mystical spirituality is practical, experiential, ineffable or nonconceptual, unitive

³ Wayne Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart: Discovering a Universal Spirituality in the World's Religions* (Novato, CA: New World Library, 1999), 20.

or nondual, noetic, integrative, sapiential, giving certitude, and in possession of transcendent knowledge from direct experience.”⁴

Interspiritual practitioners would say that while mysticism defines an experience, interspirituality defines an outlook born of the experience. The mystic is attempting to go beyond the perennial philosophy which holds that all the world’s great religions have a common or shared truth at their core. Mysticism is not simply interested in the common philosophical base of religion; it is interested in the common *experiential bases of spirituality*. In fact, mysticism holds that the common core of values and moral perspectives spoken of by perennialists is the result of this shared *mystical experience*. And interspiritual practitioners agree. This is how the leadership of *One Spirit Interfaith Seminary* express the mystical roots of interspirituality on their website:

Beneath the diversity of theological beliefs, rites, and observances lies a deeper unity of experience that is our shared spiritual heritage. Mystical spirituality is the origin of all the world religions, and every authentic spiritual path offers unique perspectives and rich insights into this deeper, direct experience of truth. In our time, the wisdom and depth of all paths are available to anyone who brings an open mind, generous spirit and heart to the search across traditions.⁵

I believe that interspirituality amounts to a form of mystical theology for the modern person. Within this theology tribalism dissolves, fluid identity is experienced as healthy, and the person is invited to find home in the here and now.

Nonetheless, while this movement is growing, a search for books, articles, or any comprehensive analysis of interspirituality’s history, theology, beliefs and practices

⁴ Teasdale, *The Mystic Heart*, 22.

⁵ One Spirit Learning Alliance, “What is Spirituality?” <http://onespiritinterfaith.org/about-us/what-is-interspirituality> (accessed December 18, 2014).

comes up short. There are very few books, and even fewer scholarly articles, exploring this spiritual/religious movement. The time has come to develop an educational model that will bring together interspiritual intellectuals, scholars, and practitioners for the purpose of developing the first comprehensive guidebook describing interspirituality's history, theology, beliefs and practices.

CHAPTER 3 PLAN OF IMPLEMENTATION

This demonstration project depends on the success of developing an educational model that will help bring together interspiritual teachers, intellectuals, scholars, students, ministers, and practitioners for the purpose of a comprehensive and in-depth exploration of Interspirituality. When successful this project will culminate in the development (potentially publishing) of the first guidebook of Interspiritual history, theology, beliefs, and practices. To this end the project will be organized along the lines of four major goals, each with an educational and outreach strategy, and method of evaluation:

Goals and Strategies

Goal 1: Begin Analysis through Scholarly Research

Strategy (To take place February thru June 2015): Scholarly research, which is to say, library-based research – mostly using the library at New York University – that will include reviewing articles, books, videos, and websites, to establish:

- A clear definition of interspirituality.
- The theological basis of interspirituality. This will focus on the works of both Wayne Teasdale and Kurt Johnson. We will explore the relationship of interspirituality to both the perennial philosophy and eastern religious thought (focusing on both Hinduism and Buddhism).
- The relationship of mysticism to interspiritual thinking.

- And to the extent possible, given the lack of written material, establish the historical development of this movement.
- During this stage of the Demonstration Project questions will be developed to help lead the interviews with scholars and practitioners that will take place later as the project evolves.

Evaluation of Goal 1:

This goal will have been met if by June 2015 the following has been achieved:

- We have developed a clear and documented (written) definition of interspirituality that is consistent with the writings of its major proponents (Wayne Teasdale, Kurt Johnson, Houston Smith, et al.).
- We have a clear outline of the major theological basis of interspirituality.
- We have a well-defined and documented theory explaining the relationship of mysticism to interspiritual theology.
- We have a written history of the major historical events that gave birth to the interspiritual movement.
- By March 2015: We have produced preliminary lists of questions that will help guide interviews with scholars and practitioners.

Goal 2: Interview Interspiritual Leaders: Scholars, Intellectuals, Activists, Ministers, and Teachers

Strategy (To take place April thru July 2015): During this stage of the Educational Model interviews with scholars, teachers, and activists, within the interspiritual movement will take place. Using the interview questions that were produced during goal number one, these interviews will focus on people such as Dr. Kurt Johnson, Rev. Dr. Diane Burke, Andrew Harvey, Rev. Dr. Joyce Liechtenstein, Dr. Houston Smith, David Wallace, Rev. Dr. Joan Block, and others. These interviews will center on:

- The personal histories that inspired interest in interspiritual thinking and practice.
- Personal understanding and definition of interspirituality.
- Intellectual and spiritual influences.
- Events, publications, and issues that each interviewee believes helped develop the interspiritual movement.
- Theological understanding of interspirituality.
- Beliefs about the future of interspirituality.

If there are major disagreements I will try and develop opportunities for interviewees to meet and discuss these issues, if possible during public forums at One Spirit Interfaith Seminary.

Evaluation of Goal 2:

This goal will have been achieved if by July 2015:

- I have been able to meet and interview a significant number of scholars and teachers of interspirituality.
- These meetings have helped clarify:
 - The definition and theology of interspirituality.
 - The relationship of mysticism to interspirituality.
 - The historical development of this movement.

Goal 3: Interview with Interspiritual Practitioners

Strategy (To take place July thru September 2015): This goal centers on interviewing interspiritual practitioners at One Spirit Interfaith Seminary (many of who are studying for ordination to interfaith ministry or who have graduated and received ordination). As we reach Goal 3 I have had the opportunity to perform significant amounts of research and interviewed scholars and

teachers in the interspiritual community, these interviews will provide an opportunity to explore if the ideas prevalent among the leaders of the movement reconcile to those of its practitioners. During this time I hope to convene at least three focus groups (as well as numerous one-on-one interviews). These interviews will focus on:

- Personal understanding of interspirituality.
- Personal beliefs and religious affiliations, if any exist.
- Daily spiritual practices and their motivation.
- Personal histories: it is essential to establish the personal experiences and influences that led the interviewees to interspirituality.

Evaluation of Goal 3:

This goal will have been achieved if by September 2015:

- I have a robust library (interview notes) detailing the personal spiritual histories of at minimum 50 practitioners.
- These histories clearly delineate the personal beliefs and religious affiliations of the interviewees.
- And these histories must also describe in considerable detail the interviewees' daily spiritual practices.

Goal 4: Develop Interspirituality's Guide to Beliefs and Practices

Strategy (To take place September thru December 2015): At this stage of the model all the research has been completed, all the interviews with scholars and teachers have taken place, and all the interviews with practitioners have been conducted. This stage involves taking all the notes and discovery that this educational model has produced and turning it into *Interspirituality's Guide to Beliefs and Practices*. This book will provide students and practitioners with a comprehensive guide to Interspirituality's history, theologies, beliefs,

and practices. It will also contain a bibliography of helpful books, organizations, and websites.

Evaluation of Goal 4:

This goal will have been achieved if by February 2016 a guidebook has been developed of such quality and comprehensiveness that One Spirit and other interfaith and interspiritual seminaries, schools and communities are willing to use it as both a textbook and guide book for students and practitioners.

Moreover, the success of this goal should also be measured by the success this demonstration project achieves in bringing together a broad and diverse community of intellectuals, students, ministers, activists, practitioners, scholars, and teachers in support of this effort. This guidebook will only be possible if the interspiritual community comes together and shares honestly its history, theology, beliefs, and practices.

CHAPTER 4 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

What is the history of interspirituality?

This guidebook will develop an historical map of the major leaders, events, books, articles and other major writings that helped shape the history of the interspiritual movement. We will look at scholar/spiritual activities such as Dr. Houston Smith, whose book *The World's Religions* played a significant role in creating interest in the world's spiritual/wisdom traditions. We will also examine the work of Br. Wayne Teasdale, whose life commitments culminated in the book *The Mystic Heart*, which coined the term "Interspirituality." He ultimately inspired Dr. Kurt Johnson, his friend and a former curator at the American Museum of American History, who recently co-wrote the book *The Coming Interspiritual Age*. Dr. Johnson remains one of the leading intellectual figures in the movement. We will also examine the influence of the World Parliament of Religions, as well as the influence of Eastern Spirituality, especially Hinduism and Buddhism.

What are the theological roots of interspirituality?

The theology of interspirituality has been deeply influenced by the rise of eastern thought. As a result, this demonstration project will explore the relationship of Hindu and Buddhist thought to the development of interspirituality. We will examine the relationship of the Perennial Philosophy (Aldous Huxley) to the development of

Interspiritual theology. Indeed we will ask ourselves: What is the relationship of the Perennial Philosophy to Interspiritual theology? In fact, is there an interspiritual theology? And if there is, what are the major tenets of this theology? This will require an exploration of the relationship of mystical theology, believed to be the basis of interspiritual thought, to interspiritual theological claims.

What are the beliefs found among people who call themselves interspiritual?

We will explore and enumerate the major beliefs held by people who call themselves interspiritual. This will require us to explore such issues as:

- The meaning and purpose of “spirituality” for interspiritual believers.
- Are there such things as “rituals” within interspirituality?
- The place of “God, “Gods”, or the “divine”, if any, for interspiritual believers.
- Is there such a thing as “sacred texts” within this community?
- How do interspiritual people interpret sacred texts?
- What, if any, are the “authority claims” made by interspiritual leaders?
- What is the place of “metaphysical speculation” or “theology”?
- What is the place of “tradition” within interspirituality?
- Do interspiritual people believe in an “after-life” and/or “grace”?
- What is the place of “mystery” within interspiritual circles?
- Are there interspiritual worship communities?

What are the common practices found among people who call themselves interspiritual?

We will explore the major practices of interspiritual people, and establish their connection to interspiritual theology, beliefs, and history. This will also mean delving into the purpose of these practices. As stated earlier, a recent survey of graduates of One Spirit Interfaith Seminary found a plethora of spiritual practices:

- Breath work
- Chanting
- Dancing
- Divination
- Exercise
- Fasting
- Forgiveness
- Journaling
- Lectio Divina
- Martial Arts
- Meditation
- Engagement with Nature
- Prayer
- Sacred Reading
- Shamanic Journey
- Silence
- Twelve Step Programs
- Visioning
- Yoga

CHAPTER 5 EVALUATION

The success of this demonstration project can be easily determined: On February 1, 2016 we must have a comprehensive guide book detailing the history, the theological foundation, the major common beliefs and the major common practices found in the interspiritual community.

The plan of implementation has clearly defined goals and strategies, each with a method to evaluate the efficacy of the strategy and attainment of the goal. Moreover, there are also four competencies which must be achieved and a method for evaluating the efficacy of the attainment of that competency. The evaluation methodologies defined in the Implementation and Competencies sections of this proposal are the complete evaluation plan of this Demonstration Project.

In short, the success of this demonstration project is dependent on the efficacy of four major activities all constituting a comprehensive educational model:

1. There will be significant scholarly research. This will involve the review of scholarly articles and books.
2. Interviews with interspiritual leaders, scholars/intellectuals, and activists.
3. Interviews with interspiritual practitioners.
4. These three activities will culminate in the production of *Interspirituality's Guide to Beliefs and Practices*.

CHAPTER 6 MINISTERIAL COMPETENCIES

The research, leadership, and exploration required in the development of this Demonstration Project will provide opportunities to discover, display, and develop various Ministerial Competencies. Each of the four primary questions we will investigate provides unique avenues to delve into and mature specific proficiencies necessary of the interfaith minister. While this list does not seek to be exhaustive, it focuses on the major competency that each research question --and the educational model I have created to explore the question -- definitely requires.

Research Question: What is the history of interspirituality?

Competency: Knowledge and appreciation of the values of other faith traditions

A multifaith minister must also be knowledgeable and show appreciation for faith traditions that are not his or her own. She or he must be capable of demonstrating how an appreciation of the other in particular is grounded in one's own faith tradition, capable of hearing and responding to the value of faith traditions of others, and able to encourage others to grow within a wider multifaith context.

Strategy: The Interspiritual movement is relatively young. Its history is unwritten, but lives mainly in the memories (and written notes and letters) of its activists, people such as Dr. Kurt Johnson, Rev. Dr. Diane Burke, Andrew Harvey, Rev. Dr. Joyce Liechtenstein, and the well-known scholar and writer Houston Smith, to name a few. Some people who are deemed part of this movement would not necessarily use the term interspiritual to define themselves, their spirituality, or their life's work. As a result, this demonstration

project will require the creation of safe multifaith spaces. In these spaces men and women from a verity of religious traditions, spiritual paths, and life experiences will come together to speak of their personal history and its relationship to the interspiritual movement, its beliefs, and its practices. As a result the following skills will need to be developed, strengthened, and exhibited:

- The ability to work with and collaborate with people of diverse and complex backgrounds.
- The ability to dialogue respectfully and intelligibly with people of different religious backgrounds and spiritual perspectives and identities.
- The ability to form bounds of trust with, and between, people of different spiritual and religious backgrounds.
- The ability to hear, understand and translate others' unique personal challenges, spiritual experiences, and theological opinions.
- The capacity to plan and execute plans, compromise and achieve goals within a multifaith context.
- The ability to bring together men and women of different backgrounds to form safe spaces where everyone is respected, heard, not judged, and understood.

Evaluation Competency One: This competency will be evaluated by the extent to which we successfully: (1) Get the cooperation of major figures to consent to interviews. These are people such as Dr. Kurt Johnson, Rev. Dr. Diane Burke, Andrew Harvey, Rev. Dr. Joyce Liechtenstein, Dr. Houston Smith, Fr. Thomas Keating and others who have been leaders in the Interspiritual movement. (2) The extent to which we successfully develop

an historical map of major events, major leaders, major books, articles, and other documents that helped shape the history of the interspiritual movement. And finally, and maybe most importantly, (3) the extent to which we are able to ascertain the motivations, personal experiences, values, and vision that motivated the men and women who have given birth to this movement in the world of spirituality, and shaped its thinking and practices.

Research Question: What are the theological roots of interspirituality?

Competency: Ability to interpret sacred texts

Using appropriate language, with sensitivity to the texts and identities of others, and demonstrating effectiveness in communicating one's ideas, an interpreter of sacred texts presents researched, organized, well-prepared, sermons or other similar forms of proclamation that are relevant and challenging to the listener's life and spiritual development.

Strategy: This demonstration project will require an examination of the sacred texts of various traditions. As well as texts that, while not considered "sacred," are nevertheless held in great respect by the interspiritual community. This will pose a series of hermeneutical challenges, as the interpretive theory prevailing in various traditions may significantly differ. The relationship of believers to their texts will also be different in each case. Finally, the texts themselves, its writers, its history, original languages, and translations, will be distinct. Therefore, for this study to succeed the following skills will need to be demonstrated:

- Understanding of each wisdom traditions' history, writings, and basic teachings. And how this differs within the interspiritual community.
- An ability to work with scholars and scholarly texts in each tradition to identify the best translations and understand the prevailing interpretations.

- An ability to explore each tradition with respect for the dignity of its own history, language, theological claims, and interpretive theory.
- Knowledge of each tradition's texts and scholarship, especially as it relates to interspiritual claims and mysticism.
- An ability to interpret and translate complex ideas from sacred texts into modern language.

Evaluation Competency Two: This competency will be deemed successful to the extent that we (1) are able to establish the major sacred and other spiritual texts that have informed the development of interspirituality. And (2) the extent to which we are able to establish how these texts are being used (and interpreted) to assist the development of interspiritual thought and practice.

Research Question: What are the beliefs found among people who call themselves interspiritual?

Competency: Knowledge and appreciation of the values of other faith traditions

A multifaith minister must also be knowledgeable and show appreciation for faith traditions that are not his or her own. She or he must be capable of demonstrating how an appreciation of the other in particular is grounded in one's own faith tradition, capable of hearing and responding to the value of faith traditions of others, and able to encourage others to grow within a wider multifaith context.

Strategy: One of the primary ways this project will study the beliefs found among people who call themselves interspiritual is through interviews with practitioners within this movement. This dialogue will require openness, respect, the ability to create safe-space, a sensitivity to differences in language and culture, and an ability to hear and understand men and women from a variety of backgrounds, with a diversity of perspectives, ideas, and feelings. This dialogue will be committed to a deep understanding of the experiences of people whose belief systems are complex, innovative, in some cases syncretic, and

also unorthodox (which is to say, their beliefs system may be remarkably different from those normally found among people of faith).

Evaluation Competency Three: This competency will be evaluated effectively achieved by the extent to which we successfully: (1) Get the consent of interspiritual believers and practitioners to in-depth interviews regarding their theology and beliefs. (2) The extent to which we are able to establish and explicate the beliefs, theologies, and moral vision that motivates men and women who define themselves as interspiritual.

Research Question: What are the common practices found among people who call themselves interspiritual?

Competency: Ability to engage productively in dialogue

Ministry in a multifaith context necessarily requires an ability to engage in dialogue with other faith traditions, and with those who hold different faith commitments.

Strategy: This demonstration project will require the creation of safe multifaith spaces for the purpose of dialogue. In these spaces men and women from a verity of religious traditions, spiritual paths, personal backgrounds, and experiences will come together and share deeply personal commitments to spiritual practices, some of which may be the object of criticism and even ridicule within mainstream religious communities. This will require the highest level of sensitivity and respect. During the course of this project the following skills will need to be developed, strengthened, and exhibited:

- The ability to bring together people of diverse and complex backgrounds and beliefs.
- The ability to dialogue respectfully and intelligibly with people of different religious backgrounds and spiritual perspectives and identities.

- The ability to form bonds of trust with people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs.
- The ability to hear, understand, and communicate people's unique personal spiritual experiences, history, and theological/spiritual opinions.
- The ability to bring together men and women of different backgrounds to form safe spaces where everyone is respected, heard, not judged, and understood.

Evaluation Competency Four: This competency will be evaluated by the extent to which we successfully: (1) Get the consent of interspiritual believers and practitioners to in-depth interviews regarding their spiritual practices. (2) The extent to which we are able to establish and explicate the beliefs, that motivates these practices. Finally, this competency will be evaluated by (3) the demonstrated ability to enumerate, describe, and explicate interspiritual practices.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: TIMELINE

Date	Task	Person Responsible
December 2014	Draft Proposal To Editor	Self
February 1, 2015	Proposal Formally Due	Self
February-March 2015	Schedule Interviews With Scholars & Practitioners (Some Will Be In The Manner Of Focus Groups)	Self
February Thru June 2015	Continue Library Research	Self
March 2015	Develop Questions For Scholars And Practitioners	Self
April Thru July 2015	Interview Of Scholars	Self
July Thru September 2015	Interview Interspiritual Practitioners	Self
September thru December 2015	Write Dissertation (from on-going notes that will be kept throughout the life of the project)	Self
December 2015	Dissertation to editor	Self
February 1, 2016	Dissertation formally due at NYTS	Self
March 1, 2016	We hear back from NYTS	Self
March 2016	Prepare Oral Presentation	Self
April 2016	Oral Presentations (45 Min)	Self

APPENDIX B: BUDGET

Date	Task	Person Responsible	Budget
December 2014	Draft Proposal Editor	Self	\$300
	Binding of Proposal	Self	\$50
	Recorder for interviews	Self	\$150
April-Sept 2015	Interviews (100 people for lunch at \$40)	Self	\$4000
2015	Meet with Site Team (four times year, four people, \$40 per person)	Self	\$640
2015	Paper, copies, supplies, miscellaneous	Self	\$300
2015	Taxis	Self	\$350
December 2015	Dissertation Editor	Self	\$1500
	Miscellaneous	Self	\$500
Total			\$7,790.00

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One Spirit

LEARNING ALLIANCE

HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT #1: Buddhism

One Spirit Interfaith Seminary

First Year Training

Your Name: _____

Your Dean: _____

Read: *The World's Religions*, by Houston Smith – “Buddhism” (pp. 82-153)

The World's Wisdom, by Philip Novak – “Buddhism” (pp. 49-109)

Developing & Deepening Your Spiritual Practice manual - “Spiritual Practices from the Buddhist Tradition” (pp. 57-68). Select at least one practice to work with this month.

The Ten Challenges, by Leonard Felder – Introduction & Ch. 1:

“Discovering the Still Small Voice Within.” Read this at the beginning of the month, reflect on where you are in relation to the issues raised, and write a 1-2 page paper on your personal reflections.

Complete: **SQ21 Online Survey** (see handout for details)

Note: # of lines listed should be the maximum length of your answer for the questions below.

I. STUDY QUESTIONS

1) Read *The World's Wisdom*: "**Selections from the Dhammapada**" (pp. 103-106)

a) "Mindfulness is the way to the deathless; inattentiveness the way to death. Those who are diligently attentive do not die; those who are thoughtless are as if dead already."

What do you think the Buddha meant by this teaching? (4)

b) Give an example of how this tenet has worked in your life. (5)

2) Read *The World's Religions*: "The Man Who Woke Up" (pp. 82-88)

a) What do you think the Buddha meant by saying, "I am awake"? (6)

b) What does it mean to you to be "awake"? (7)

c) Two sentences from the Buddha's valedictory are with us today: "All composite things decay," and "work out your own salvation with diligence." Explain what each of these teachings means to you.

"All composite things decay:" (5)

"Work out your own salvation with diligence:" (5)

3) Read *The World's Religions*: "The Rebel Saint" (pp. 92-99)

a) What are the six aspects Houston Smith claims are present in most religious traditions? (6)

b) Which of these do you resonate with most? Explain why. (4)

c) Smith describes seven ways that Buddha's preaching ran contrary to Hindu teaching and practice. What are they? (6)

d) Which of these seems most important to you and why? (5)

4) Read *The World's Religions*: "The Four Noble Truths" (pp. 99-103)

a) Describe and briefly explain the four basic tenets. (8)

b) Which of these is most relevant in your life at this time? Explain. (4)

5) Read *The World's Religions*: "The Eightfold Path" (pp. 103-112)

a) What is the preliminary step and why is it important? (3)

b) List and briefly explain each of the eight steps. (2 lines each)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.
- 6.
- 7.
- 8.

c) Which one do you struggle with most at this time? Explain. (4)

6) Read *The World's Religions*: "Basic Buddhist Concepts" (pp. 112-119)

a) How is "nirvana" described? (3)

b) Do you understand nirvana as God? Explain. (3)

c) What is your understanding of "karma"? (4)

d) How do you understand free will as it relates to karma? (5)

e) List and briefly explain the Three Marks of Existence. (5)

f) Which one resonates the most with you now? Explain. (4)

7) Read *The World's Wisdom*: "Core Doctrines" (pp. 69-70)

The Buddha said, "Who sees Dependent Origination sees the Dharma; who sees the Dharma sees Dependent Origination." How do you understand this? (5)

8) Read *The World's Religions*: "Big Raft and Little" (pp. 119-127)

a) What does "Theravada" mean? (4)

b) What does "Mahayana" mean? (4)

c) What are the major differences between the two? (5)

9) Read *The World's Religions*: "The Secret of the Flower" (pp. 128-139)

a) What does Zen say about scripture and creed? (5)

b) What is "zazen"? (4)

c) What are "koans" and what is their role in Zen study? (4)

d) What is your understanding of "satori"? (4)

10) Read *The World's Religions*: "The Diamond Thunder Bolt" (pp. 139-144)

a) What does "vajrayana" mean? (3)

b) Define "tantra". (3)

c) What role does Tantric Buddhism place on sexuality? (4)

d) In your own words, explain the significance of the Dalai Lama. (5)

11) Buddhism is a non-theistic religion, one that does not acknowledge a creator God.

a) Who then are all these deities and Bodhisattvas, and how do you explain their appearance and their roles in a non-theistic tradition? (5)

b) What comes up for you when you explore the teaching that there is no creator God? (4)

12) In Buddhist teachings, there is no permanent, intrinsic self or individuality.

a) What then re-incarnates from one existence to another? (4)

b) If it is true that there is no separate, permanent, independently arising self or personality, then who are you? Who is it that does anything? (4)

13) In Buddhist teaching, *ignorance* rather than *sin* prevents our liberation.

a) How do you understand this distinction? (4)

b) Do you agree with this teaching? If you accepted this premise, how might it impact your own life? If this principle were accepted on a large scale, how might it impact the world? (5)

II. SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

14) Read *Developing & Deepening Your Spiritual Practice* manual: Spiritual Practices from the Buddhist Tradition.

Which of the Buddhist spiritual practices did you work with this month? (4)

15) Describe how you participated in this (these) practice(s), what the experience was like for you, and any new insights/ self-discoveries that may have opened for you. (12)

II. OVERVIEW

16) In your reading about Buddhism and/or the practices you worked with this month...

a) What was most interesting to you? (4)

b) Most surprising? (5)

c) Most challenging? (6)

17) Are there ways you might need to stretch in order to see and appreciate the wisdom and beauty in this tradition? (Please elaborate) (10)

18) What have you learned from your study of Buddhism that will most inform your life and your spiritual journey in a practical way? (7)

IV. For all students, please indicate how you participated in class for the previous month.

- ☐ I attended in person on Saturday
- ☐ I attended in person on Sunday

- ☐ I attended the webinar on Saturday
- ☐ I attended the webinar on Sunday

- ☐ I have listened to the audiobooks of the class/portions of the class that I missed.
- ☐ I will listen to the audiobooks of the class/portions of the class that I missed by
_____. (Date)

V. For all students, please confirm that you have completed the SQ21 Online Survey:

- ☐ Yes, I have completed the SQ21 Online Survey.

VI. The Ten Challenges:

Read the *Introduction* and *Ch. 1: "Discovering the Still Small Voice Within."*

Reflect on where you are in your life in relation to the spiritual issues raised by this chapter, and write a 1 – 1½ page (typewritten, double-spaced) personal reflection paper on your insights and discoveries about your own spiritual life and journey. The title of the paper should be "Reflections on *The Ten Challenges*, Chapter 1: "Discovering the Still Small Voice Within." Please remember to put your name at the top of each page of the paper.

(Please note: This paper is not meant to be either an academic discourse or a critique of Felder. It is intended to be your *personal* reflection on how the issues raised in the chapter have expressed or are expressing themselves in your own spiritual life. Whether or not you like Felder's writing or specific treatment of the issues in each chapter, the issues themselves are universal to the spiritual journey, and deserving of personal reflection. Your sharing in these papers is one of the ways we get to know you and develop a sense of how to be of service to you in your spiritual unfolding.)

Appendix C: The Interspiritual Questionnaire

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 1) Your name: _____
- 2) Your email: _____
- 3) Your phone number: _____ (optional)
- 4) Your age: _____
- 5) Your race: _____
- 6) Your ethnicity: _____
- 7) Your gender: _____
- 8) Your present occupation:

- 9) Where were you born: _____
- 10) Where were you raised: _____
- 11) Where did you go to school: Other personal gifts you would like to share about yourself that have affected your spirituality:

INTERSPIRITUAL QUESTIONNAIRE

- 1) Were you raised within any specific religious tradition or path? If so, which?
- 2) Would you describe your family and/ or your childhood as religious?
- 3) How would you describe “spirituality”?
- 4) How would you describe “religion”?
- 5) What are some of your earliest spiritual/ religious memories?
- 6) How would you describe your spiritual journey?
- 7) Have you had any experience that you would define as “spiritual” in nature that significantly influenced your evolution? (Please describe this experience.)
- 8) How would you describe your spirituality today?

9) How would you describe your Theology? (Theology simply defined as the ideas, beliefs or philosophy that informs and/or explains your faith or spirituality.)

10) Does God (or any concept of Deity or Deities) have any place in your spirituality?

11) If God or Deities do have a place in your spirituality, please describe your understanding of God or Deities.

12) Name your most influential spiritual teachers.

13) What religious or spiritual texts, if any, do you look to for guidance?

14) Do you believe there is a difference between a “spiritual text” and a “sacred text”?
If so, what is the difference?

15) In your view what norms or standards establish a text as sacred?

16) How would you describe your method (or theory) of interpretation of sacred texts?

- 17) How have experiences with multiple religious traditions influenced your interpretation of sacred texts?
- 18) How do your political values and social commitments influence your interpretation of sacred texts?
- 19) How did formal education at any level affect your interpretation of sacred texts?
If you have had technical or professional training in non-religious fields, how does this bear upon your way of reading sacred texts?
- 20) What other differentiating factors from social or cultural life affect your interpretation of sacred texts?
- 21) How would you define interspirituality?
- 22) Would you define yourself as interspiritual?
- 23) What, if any, is the relationship of mysticism to interspirituality?
- 24) How would you describe mysticism?

25) Would you describe yourself a mystic? If so, why?

26) What is a “spiritual practice”?

27) What, if any, are your spiritual practices? How often do you engage in these?

28) What is the value of spiritual practice?

29) Is there anything else you would like to share?

You have completed the Interspiritual Questionnaire. Thank you so much for the gift you have given to me of your time and effort, it is greatly appreciated!

Appendix D: Email Sent to Survey Participants

Dear Friends in the Interspiritual Community,

I am in the process of working on a doctoral dissertation on Interspirituality at *New York Theological Seminary*. As part of this dissertation I am putting together a short and simple description of interspiritual beliefs and practices. It is my hope that this will aid students and scholars interested in this emerging movement.

To this end I am surveying a very small community of interspiritual leaders, practitioners, and scholars. This survey will explore personal background, spirituality, theological beliefs, and personal practices. These surveys, along with my research, will help aid in defining interspirituality, its philosophy, theology, and practices.

The surveys will remain confidential; no one will be quoted by name without written permission.

You are among the interspiritual leaders whom I am reaching out to in the hopes that you will participate in this survey. After I receive your completed survey I will contact you via phone call to review your responses (a process that should take no more than one hour).

If you chose to participate, I would deeply appreciate getting your completed survey no later than Monday, September 21, 2015. You can email your completed survey to: mrjosemroman@gmail.com (You should also feel free to contact me with any questions at this email or call me at 646-251-5631.)

Please let me know via email if you have chosen to be part of this project.

Thank you so much for your time. May spirit continue to bless you and your ministry.

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